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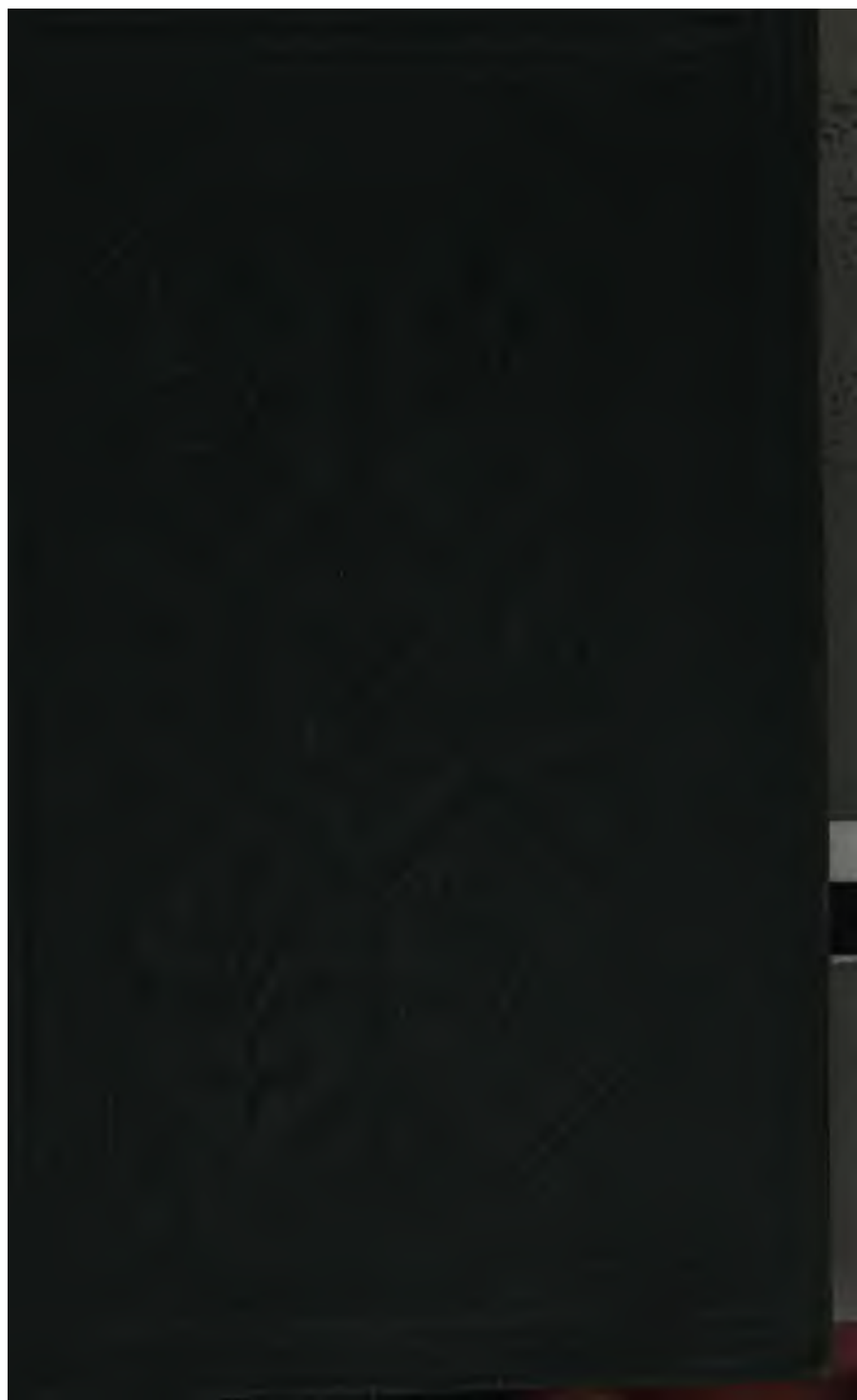
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STEVEN LAWRENCE, YEOMAN.

LONDON: RICHARD BENTLEY & CO.

STEVEN LAWRENCE,

Deoman.

BY MRS. EDWARDES,

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"ARCHIE LOVELL."

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STEVEN LAWRENCE, YEOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

A STORY WITHOUT A MORAL.

"A FAIR face, Klaus," said Steven Lawrence, thoughtfully—"a face that might well tempt a man to give up the wilderness, forget his gun and his comrade, and all the old landmarks of his life!" And, as he spoke, the yeoman took Miss Fane's photograph from his breast again, and, holding it up before his eyes, examined it long and critically in the fast-sinking sunset light.

Sunset in the tropics: sunset on the outskirts of a Mexican forest—stately, solemn, unruffled by man, as in the days when Cortes and his band first marched, silent with wonder, through the flowering woods and golden sierras of the land that they had come to conquer! What a chaos of noble colour, what an Eden of blossom and of odour, what royal prodigality of untrammelled life was around Steven in this moment when he resolved to discard his fond mistress, Nature, and return to the larger cares, the scantier pleasure of civilization! The spot where the hunters had encamped themselves for the night was at the height of some three or four thousand feet above the level of the sea, and a glowing sweep of lowland country—yellow maize fields and towering maguey intermingling with orchards, villages, and gardens—stretched away, league beyond league, before them, until it broke into blue haze at the foot of the snow-capped range of distant Cordilleras.

On one hand, bordering the narrow path or deer track along

which the hunters had travelled, a dense undergrowth of cactus and prickly pear, matted together with wild rose, honeysuckle, and flowering vine, formed an impenetrable barrier to the forest ; on the other, through tangled arches over-roofed by bamboo and palm, by glossy-leaved banana or drooping boughs of the white-blossomed dogwood, could be caught long vistas of woodland shade ; the turf ankle-deep in verbenas, white and purple iris, and a thousand exotic orchids of nameless hues and beauty. Aloes, with their candelabra-like spikes of bloom ; tree ferns in all the marvellous grace of their giant fronds ; orange and red gladioli ; and a very wilderness of rope-plants, passion flowers and lycopodiums clothed the ground to the verge of a ravine which, at seventy or eighty feet distant, fell abruptly into the valley. The soft west wind was laden to intoxication with odour. Myrtle, citron, and peach groves ; the milk-white datura ; the waxen flowers of the plant which the Indians, in their language, call, " Flower of the Heart," all lent their sweetness to the voluptuous incense of the hour : while (as if no sense should be left unconquered) a solitary mocking-bird, close at hand beside the hunters' camp, filled the whole forest-side with the echoes of her plaintive and most musical mimicry.

And to all this wealth of nature by which he was surrounded—to forest and valley, smiling lowland and distant mountain—Steven Lawrence was insensible. His heart was away—away by a low white homestead on a bleak sea-shore : a Kentish homestead with cool winds blowing from the sea, a gray sky over head, and the fresh, wild smell from seaweed on the beach mingling with the homely sweetness of wall-flowers and budding lilacs along the garden-walks. Steven Lawrence's heart was in the home where he had not been since he was a boy—the home whose hearth he had forsaken in his boyish jealousy, and on which the fire of a stranger burnt now. Home ! What were perfume-laden winds, fruits and flowers chasing each other in unbroken succession throughout the months—what was all this affluence of alien colour and sound and odour compared to the magic of that short word ?

It was mid-April, and he could picture to himself how the old farm, every field, every rood in every field, of which he knew, must

look. The young corn sprinkling its tender verdure athwart the fallows ; the potatoes showing their dusky ridges on the southern hill-side ; the whitening orchard with the daffodils in the grass ; the copse, where the wood-pigeons must be building, and the larch and maple putting forth their glistening buds ; the bare wych-elm and the sallow willows by the brook—he could see it all !—minutely, vividly, as only a man to whom Nature is the great passionate reality of life ever sees opening buds, and whitening orchards, and early-tinted fallows ! Was the five-acres sowed with wheat or barley this year ? he wondered ; and was the Vicar's Close (never, from time immemorial, belonging to any member of the Established Church) kept pasture still ? He could hear the lowing of the cattle as they came home along the sandy sea-ward road at milking-time ; could mark the lazy neap-tide crawling in midway across the sands : could see the light of a wood fire blazing cheerfully through the bay-window of the farm-parlour ; could see the white cloth spread ; himself coming home, tired, from his day's work, along the garden walk and in the porch ;—but now imagination, not memory, worked, and the picture grew less distinct ; in the porch a slender girlish figure, a tender smile upon a beautiful mouth, two little hands outstretched to clasp his neck, and then Steven Lawrence gave a great sigh, came back with a start to Mexico again, and found the face of which he dreamed smiling to him from the bit of cardboard in his hands.

“ A fair face,” he repeated once more and aloud. “ If such things were at all in your way, Klaus, I would ask you to take a look at it before you help me with your advice.”

“ Advice !” repeated a deep voice, slowly—a voice in which, although more than twenty years had been passed away from the fatherland, the good old German gutturals were grafted, with an effect which I shall not attempt to reproduce, upon a broad New England accent. “ A man of your age, in love, to ask advice of a man of mine ! Give me the picture, Steven, and I shall say all that you want me to say of it—an angel face, myosotis eyes, rose-and-milk skin, a pair of lips like cherries—everything that a man in love would have his mistress possess, but advice—no ! Advice between

friends should be the result of reason, and love, from the beginning of it to the end, is a passion by its very nature divorced from reason. If I advised at all—*gehe!*—let me see her! When you are away from me I would like, anyhow, to know the exact form in which your per—your happiness, Steven, your happiness, was accomplished.”

And old Klaus stretched out his brown sinewy hand—a hand not much accustomed to handle ware so frail—and took the little vignette photograph over which Steven Lawrence was still intently poring.

As he held it in silent scrutiny for some moments, a flood of orange light, the transient after-glow of the tropics, fell suddenly across the clearing where the old German and Steven had encamped for the night, and set forth in clearest relief the figures of the two men—of the man who had lived and loved, and whose tired heart knew the worth of both possessions, and the man before whose hopes life and love lay outstretched in gilded perspective still, and whose strong heart leaped with passion as he looked forward to his own share in both. What a contrast outwardly between the two! How easy for one to hold love and beauty so cheap; how natural for the other to consider them as purest gold! What could poor old Klaus—at this moment the thought struck Steven—what could a man like this have ever known of love? At five and twenty could that hard gray face of his have been young? Could any woman have kissed his lips with love? Could he ever, save out of musty German books, have learnt the crude philosophy which had turned all one side of his honest, sterling heart to gall?

Klaus is a big-made, ridiculously angular man; tall in reality, but not looking so, from the disproportionate size of his hands and feet, and the awkward, crane-like fashion in which his head is set upon a pair of sloping shoulders. His face is a wonderful face: the skin tanned, freckled, and lined to an extent that makes his own statement of having been “lily fair” when he was a boy, the most wildly incredible of all Klaus’s stories: the high, projecting forehead seamed with furrows; the pale blue eyes deep set, void of any perceptible eyebrow or eyelash and with that peculiar half-scowling

expression in them common to men whose lives have been spent, whether on sea or land, in confronting sun, and wind, and storm unsheltered. No vestige of hair is to be seen on his upper lip or chin, and this peculiarity alone, in a life where every man goes bearded, gives something weird to the expression of the poor old fellow's face—an expression heightened by his thin, keen-cut nose, always carried aloof, as he says of himself, like a fox's in search of prey, and the hard compressed lips rarely parted, save twice in the twenty-four hours to eat, or, almost more rarely still, to speak. A sparse tuft of hair, of a wan, clay colour, clothes the extreme top of Klaus's skull: the forehead, the temples, the back region of the head, are perfectly bare. "My hair has too often come off after jungle fever to offer to grow again now," he explains sometimes. "I have just enough left to be scalped by, when those *verfluchte* Indians get hold of me at last. Could the finest lovelocks that ever grew serve the purpose better?" Such is Klaus's exterior.

Steven Lawrence is an Englishman of seven or eight and twenty, Saxon-looking in the extreme, even in Indian mocassins, red flannel shirt, and Mexican sombrero. Of his face, inasmuch as the feature which gives the key-note to the rest is masked by beard, all I shall say here is that he has a broad smooth forehead, whose fairness contrasts quaintly with the sienna brown of his sunburnt cheeks; crisp dark hair growing low upon the temples, as you may have seen in a tapestried portrait of Henri Quatre in the Louvre; a nose somewhat too short to belong to the aristocratic British type, but clean cut as a statue's, and forming in profile an unbroken line from the forehead; gleaming white teeth that show, in spite of the beard, whenever he speaks or smiles, and a pair of well-opened resolute blue eyes. You could hardly look into his face and doubt that he possessed, at least, a manly mouth and chin. Nature surely would not commit the anomaly of allying positive weakness with that sturdy head, those bold blue eyes of his. But what of intellectual, what of moral strength? I pause until I can bring poor Steven before you, shorn, to answer that question. He is stalwart and tall, over six feet in mocassins, broad chested, lithe of limb, thoroughly, unconsciously graceful, as only human creatures who have lived, as he has,

an unfettered, half-savage life can ever be now-a-days. As he lies outstretched upon the turf—his rifle at his side, his handsome face, half in shadow, half lit up by this orange glow, as he turns it round to his companion—he looks for very certain a man : a man whose physical proportions a Greek sculptor of old would not have disdained as a model. The well-set, crisp-curled head ; the broad, low forehead ; the level glance of eye, the throat, the limbs, might all have belonged to the race among whom the gods dwelt ; and of mind, of soul—well, with the eager expression that his features wear just now, there is enough even of these upon the yeoman's face, perhaps, for a Greek.

Easy to imagine, I repeat, that the love and beauty poor old Klaus holds so cheap would be considered by Steven Lawrence, in this fresh spring-time of his manhood, as the purest gold !

“The face is a handsome one, Steven : no doubt concerning that much : the face is a handsome one. As the picture is uncoloured, I'm disqualified, of course, from speaking of the rose-and-lily skin, the *myosotis* eyes, but——”

“But the expression of the face ?” interrupted Steven Lawrence impatiently, as he took back the photograph from Klaus's hand. “What do I care for roses and lilies, and myo— hang it all ! what do I care for a market-gardener's list of beauties, when I am speaking of a woman's face—a woman's face that I love ? I may say it, though I haven't seen her for near upon a dozen years. The eyes may be black, or blue, or brown, I will swear they are eyes that could love : the lips may be rosy-red or not—they are lips that could speak brave words, and give a man brave kisses, and if I can win them they shall be mine ! Now, Klaus, I have spoken out the plain truth to you at last.” And he took another fond look at the photograph, then put it carefully within a letter—a letter well worn and creased, as if it had been read and re-read, and hid it away again within his breast.

Without answering a word the old German rose, his rifle in his hand, and walked off to examine the stakes of the two little mustang horses that, at twenty or thirty yards distance, were tethered out to graze. He then carefully, and with a master hand, turned the

savoury haunch of venison that was roasting for their evening meal across the embers of a clear wood fire ; finally took out a pouch of tobacco from his pocket, twisted up a cigarito, lit it, and came back to Steven's side. In the five minutes that had elapsed since he went away, the tropical after-glow had faded into night. Already a white full moon was shining behind the crest of the opposite palm-covered hills ; already great Orion was saluting the Southern Cross through the transparent ether. The thickets were sparkling with fire-flies ; the cardinals and mocking birds were hushed ; the toll of the campanero alone resounded, plaintive and clear, like an Old World village bell, through the forest.

"The haunch is browning to a turn, Steven, and smells good exceedingly," said old Klaus. "Have you an appetite to-night?"

"Have I not?" answered Steven, heartily. "I was just thinking, as you came back, Klaus, that my hunger was prodigious. We haven't eaten since a little past sunrise, and then, to speak honestly, I was ill-satisfied : three partridges, a quail, and a dozen of pheasant eggs isn't over much of a breakfast between two men like you and me. How long will it be, do you think, before the food is ready?"

"A quarter of an hour," said Klaus ; "time enough for my cigarito, and for the advice which you may remember I have not given you yet. Do I advise you to make your way across to Tampico, or go down straight away to Vera Cruz? That's about what you want me to talk to you of, Steven, isn't it?"

"Klaus," answered the Englishman, "one thing is certain : sooner or later I *must* return to the old country ; not, as you will say, because of this fancy for a woman's face—if Dora Fane had never written to me or sent me her picture at all, I must go back just the same. This life of ours—well, no man knows better than you how well the life suits me. I've no education ; I haven't, I suppose, what men in cities call brains ; and a year ago I should have laughed at any man who had told me I should give up deer-stalking and quail-shooting for the old English life, the plough and the harrow, the sowing and the reaping, from which I ran away when I was a boy. Money, perhaps, Klaus, quite as much as love, if I speak the truth, is what takes me back. While my uncle lived, while young Josh held the

farm, and while I was a beggar, I loathed the thought of the dull village life, the daily farm work, the comfortable old house, the place in the meeting-house, from which the lad's inopportune legitimacy had ousted me. Now that I know these things are mine, that three or four hundred of good sovereigns are to be made a year out of my own land, if I return and put my shoulder (as the shoulders of all my forefathers have been) to the plough, I begin to think my duty lies there, on my own bit of land, and that the old village-monotony, meeting-house and all, is what I was born and intended for."

"Even without the *myosotis*—" began Klaus, holding his cigarito between his fingers, and looking full at Steven's face.

"Even without a woman being mixed up in it at all," interrupted Steven, quickly. "And if my-o-so-tis means blue—, as I suppose, you're wrong altogether. Dora Fane, to the best of my recollection, had eyes like sloes."

"Never," said the old German, decisively. "On that point I am certain, my friend. The woman from whom that photograph was taken had never black eyes. Brown, possibly, or hazel, or any shade of blue you choose, but black—never! Are you sure, now, you are in love with the right woman, Steven?" he added. "How many years is it since you saw this Dora last? Are you certain you'd know her if you met her in the streets of Vera Cruz next week?"

"I should know the woman from whom this photograph was taken if I met her anywhere," answered Steven, promptly. "Of Dora Fane, as she used to be—well, if you bring me to exact facts, of Dora Fane as she used to be, my recollections are just about as confused as possible. I was eighteen when I left home, and she, by Jove! Klaus, she was within a year, for certain, of my own age."

"Which makes her now?"

"Seven and twenty, at least! Is it possible—and the picture would give you the idea of a woman in her first prime, twenty at the outside! Well, never mind; she'll be a better mate for me—fitter for the sort of life she'll have to lead as my wife. I never thought of her as that kind of age, though! Eighteen—well, say she was two years younger, which she wasn't, than me—sixteen and ten would be twenty-six, at the youngest. I'm pleased you understand,

Klaus, pleased that it should be so. An experienced woman of six and twenty knows better how to love than a flighty girl of eighteen ; still I never did think of Dora Fane as of that kind of age, I must confess."

"And there was some sort of love-making going on between you, young as you were, Steven ? Before you left home, you and the girl had looked upon each other like sweethearts, I suppose, already ?"

"Not exactly," said Steven, after remaining silent for a minute or two, while he ransacked his memory ; "indeed, I can't positively say I ever spoke to her a dozen times in my life. Dora, as I have told you, was a poor relation and dependent of the Squire's, half play-mate, half governess, of little Katharine Fane, his step-daughter ; and—well, as far as I recollect, not averse to the attentions of the different young men about the neighbourhood. There was young Hoskins, the doctor, I know ; and Smith, the curate, used to meet her when she walked out with the child ; not to speak of myself, whom of course she only noticed when there was no better fellow by, and——"

"Young Hoskins, and the curate, and you, when there was no better fellow by !" exclaimed Klaus, flinging away the end of his cigarito. "And of *this* woman—this woman who, a dozen years ago, carried on love affairs by the half-score—you are madly, over head and ears, enamoured ? Why, 'tis sheer downright idiocy—a thing to put yourself into the doctor's hands for. What do you remember of her ? that she was no better conducted than she should have been before she had well done with being a child. What do you know of her ? that, by your own showing, she is a woman getting on for thirty years of age, and who, in all these years, has not found a man fool enough to marry her yet."

"I remember of her," said Steven, quietly, "that she was a pretty delicate-faced child, neither worse nor better, I suppose, than other children of her age. I know of her that she has grown up like this !" He laid his hand for an instant upon his breast pocket, where the photograph lay. "That she has written me a letter showing that, during all these years—years during which, the Lord knows, I have been faithful to nothing !—she has continued true to her childish

fancy for me (one of the Fanes true to me, Steven Lawrence !), and that, as soon as I find myself back in England, I shall ask her in plain words to be my wife. She was giddy, if you choose, when she was a girl ; she is nearer thirty than twenty ; no man has married her. I will ! The thing is settled, Klaus, for good or for evil, as far as I am concerned. Let us talk of other matters."

"After supper, Steven ; we have ten minutes yet before the haunch is ready, and those ten minutes we'll devote to the discussion of love. After to-night, friend, till the day I lose you, let not the sorry subject of woman or of marriage pass our lips again ! I have no thought of changing you, you know I don't believe you're a man likely to alter in whatever you've made up your mind to do, but I should like to tell you—tell you," hesitated old Klaus, with an odd sort of shyness, "a love story of—a friend of mine, say. It happened twenty-five years ago come next fall, and I've never opened any lips concerning it to mortal man or woman before to-night. I always thought I should take it with me, unspoken, to the grave, but you see, Steven, I've loved you as a son—no, I hate the word ; a son implies a mother—I've loved you with a feeling such as men don't often have for each other, I guess, out of the wilderness, and if any words of mine *could* put wisdom into your head, I'd speak them—let alone the pain it would cost myself. You'll hear my story, lad ? Soh ! Well, then, I must think a bit first. I'm no speaker. I don't know how to spin a yarn of plain meaning into three volumes or so of fine-drawn stuff and sentiment, like a paid romancer. What I've got to say would go printed into one paragraph—about as much as the country paper takes for a giant gooseberry or a shower of frogs when politics are scarce. Still I must think a bit first. Five and twenty years (about what you've lived since you were first set upon your feet) is a longish gap in a man's life—long, I mean, to remember a dream after—and this was a dream, Steven ! a young man's dream, such as you are dreaming at this minute. All that it concerns you to hear about is the awakening. You've only to look into your own heart, I reckon, to imagine the first part better than I could describe it now."

He stopped abruptly, and leant his head down for a few moments

between his hands, then raised himself, stiff and motionless, to his former position, and with the red glow from the distant fire faintly shining at intervals upon his face, told his love-story—a story destined to be recalled pretty often to the memory of Steven Lawrence during the years to come.

“It was in the old country, my friend, that the thing began, at a town upon the Rhine—whose name doesn’t matter—a town south of Frankfort, where men’s hearts in their youth are generous as the wine they drink, and where the women for centuries past have borne the reputation of beauty. The girl my friend loved was a type of their beauty at its highest: a marble bust; wide-open eyes, set far apart under a fair and womanly forehead; sun-coloured hair; white arms; a carriage at once lissom and firm, yielding and majestic—*mein Gott!* why do I enlarge on such a theme?—a type of the women, I suppose, who, since the world began, have lured men on ever by the shortest road to perdition! My friend had passed from boyhood into manhood in the same street with her, and his passion had grown with his growth, strengthened with his strength; so, when he was three and twenty, the girl nineteen, they were engaged. There was equality of birth, equality of poverty between them; and one day it occurred to my friend that it might be a manlier life to work for the woman he loved in a new country than starve with her on his good college education, and a certain foolish prefix he had before his name, in the old one. So, after a little tender hesitation on the part of his betrothed, he put his Greek and Latin (his nobility too) for ever aside, and started with the small patrimony he possessed to New Brunswick, where some distant relations of his family had already settled. In two years’ time he was master of a farm, small but well stocked, and prosperous; a comfortable home to which to take his bride; and he returned to the fatherland to fetch her.

“She met him: she fell upon his neck as he landed from the river steamboat; and in a week their marriage-day was fixed. I was not . . . my friend was not, of a jealous or suspicious character. He was plain—your English word describes him better than any in our language—plain of face, plain of character; where he loved, he

loved ; where he trusted, he trusted ; and where he was betrayed, he was betrayed !" added Klaus, his voice sinking into a hollow, bitter imitation of a laugh. " There was no *unsinn* of any kind, no shilly-shally about the man—in this like you, I think, Steven. What he did, he did ; and he loved this woman wholly, with a love that put the possibility of doubt or misgiving out of the question. And they were married.

" There were village tales, both before and after his wedding-day, reaching my friend's ear, of an attachment that had taken place during his absence between his betrothed and a cousin of his own, a man with whom he had been at college, and whom he looked upon and loved as his nearest friend. He laughed at them ; repeated them openly to his bride and to his friend ; invited the man to his marriage-feast ; pressed his hand more warmly than he pressed the hand of father or of mother when he left Germany ; and a year later, when, like himself, his cousin had given up the old country and came out to Brunswick to try his fortune, received him into his own house there, and gave him the welcome of a brother.

" Why do I linger ? One day, late in the fall—the maples were reddening, I remember, the hickory-leaves like gold—my friend came home from his work at night as usual ; and found himself betrayed. His wife had left him. I don't know how such things affect men in cities," said old Klaus huskily, " men who don't believe in over-much, who don't stake their happiness on one more than another out of the hundred of things which make up the occupation of their lives. This man, you see, without a second's preparation, had lost all—his life, his hope, his religion ! All. He stared blankly about the little sitting-room . . . her work, her book, on the table—a bunch of flowers that he gave her yesterday on the mantelshelf ; then he walked upstairs, as quiet to outward appearance as you are now, took his pistols from the place where they lay by the bedside, and walked off to the nearest river station, six miles from his farm, and the route, as he was told on the road, that the lovers had taken. . . .

" . . . If I had come upon them, then and there, mark you, Steven, with my passion at white heat, I'll stake high that I should

have made short work with them both. I'd no thought of calling him out to fight. I wasn't in a state of mind to think of honour or of cowardice. Quiet and calm though I kept outwardly, I was mad : thirsting with a madman's rage for my revenge. And here's the luck of things ! If I had found them then, I *must* have gone through the rest of my life red-handed—no doubt of that, and it wouldn't have been a matter of conscience at all, but of sheer physical necessity. If I had seen her face—the lily face with its meek eyes looking into his as they once looked into mine—what choice would have been left me (you can answer, you know what love is) in the matter ?

“ Well, I say, luck decides all things, and mercifully for me more than for them, perhaps, I did not come upon them at once. The man who told me they had gone away by the river misled me purposely ; and it was not till a fortnight later—there were few railroads in those days, you know—that I found myself close upon their track at last at a certain town down in Vermont. They had left this town—I wish to say no names—for a village, so I learnt at the hotel, a league or so distant down the lake, and I had only to go on by the five o'clock boat that afternoon and find them.

“ The five o'clock boat. There were three hours to pass away before the steamer left, and instead of going to the bar of the hotel, and deadening myself to the level of a brute with brandy, as it had been my habit to do during the last fortnight, something moved me to walk straight away out of the town into the fields. It was the late autumn weather, as I have said ; yellow, sunshiny weather, with only a ring of sharpness to make the air more sweet. I walked along, unconscious what direction I took, to the outskirts of a wood, a mile and a half, may be, from the town, and sitting down on a new-fallen block of logwood, took out my pipe and lit it. The cat-birds were calling, the woodpeckers hammering in the woods, the squirrels darting to and fro in the branches, the lizards chasing the insects in the sun, with the sort of joy I've since observed dumb creatures show just before the winter comes ; and something in their ignorant happiness smote me. I thought of the woods by the Rhine, where Franz and I used to go when we were boys. I remembered once, after a fall I had, how the lad, younger and weaker than I

was, had carried me to the nearest village, and set off alone through the snow and darkness to bring my mother to my bed. I thought of our play at school, our freaks at college together ; and then, with a sudden horror, I remembered what he had done, and what I had got on my soul to do to-night ! An intense pity, not for her, not for him, but for myself, came like a flood upon my heart. What ! I thought, with the world full of sunshine, with these dumb creatures, and the woods and fields full of joyous life, *I* was to be a castaway ? With stained hands, and soiled conscience, with memory from which all my past fair youth must perforce be blotted, I must drag out whatever number of years it should still be my curse and my unutterable misery to live ?

“Up till now I hadn’t reasoned, you understand. Blind, senseless, animal passion, had been all that had moved me. In this minute I was a man again. Yes, thank the Lord !” cried old Klaus, fervently, “I was a man ! I took no thought then for the future. I thought neither of my disgraced home, and how I should have to live there solitary, nor of the world’s opinion—no, nor of them, and of the life that they would live together. One thing only I resolved—to let their guilt be on their own souls, and take no portion of it upon mine. Not for a woman’s falseness would I give up something more precious to me than all the marble necks and scarlet lips the world contained—my own unspotted conscience. I wasn’t religious then more than you’ve known me, not with lip-religion, Steven ; but in that moment, I believe, as firmly as I believe there is a God above, that His voice spoke to me. Would a little yellow sunshine, the sight of those gray squirrels in the trees, have taken away madness like mine, unless He had willed it so ?

“Well, in spite of everything I said, I’m spinning out a yarn that would fill a volume, after all ; and something in the smell of the meat assures me it isn’t far off being ready. I can finish it all short, now. I returned ; and from that day I speak of till the day when I chanced to hear she was dead, close upon eight years afterwards, I never heard nor spoke her name again. There were men, I know, who said I acted with a poor spirit, and others, that I showed a deuced deal more worldly sense than could have been expected of

me ; but whatever they said, you may believe, concerned me little. To a man suffering what I suffered, there are neither smaller sufferings nor smaller shames. Two years, for very dogged obstinacy, I dragged my life on at my farm—slept in the same bed, ate at the table where she had been at my side ! Then I sold everything—there wasn't over and above much to sell : things hadn't prospered with me since she left—and became, as you have seen me, a wanderer on the face of the earth. I haven't, as you know, grown into a man-hater. I have had mates I have liked, one or two friends, besides you, whom I have loved ; perhaps, taking all into account, I've led as good a life as the men who live cribbed up like Christians, with a wife and children and all the other blessings of life, in cities.

"Still, Steven, still," said the old man putting his rough hand abruptly to his breast, as if a pain had smitten him, "there's been *something* wanting to me always. She was part of my flesh and of my spirit, you see, and as a matter of common nature I've never been to say the same since she was taken from me. And now I come to the moral of all that I've been trying to tell you. As long as the world lasts, and while men are what they are, they must marry, I suppose ; I'm not gainsaying that, or setting up my sorry bit of experience against a rule that the world for a good many thousand years has found to answer better than any other. You're not a boy any more, and when you get home you'll want a wife to keep your house, and bring up your children, and set a neat dinner before you and your friends at Christmas——"

"And a wife I mean to have, please God !" interpolated Steven, firmly.

"But you don't need to give over more than what is absolutely needful : your honour, your fireside peace, your children's name—enough, God knows !—into her hands. You don't need to put down your heart for her to tread upon, your reason for her to blind and lead astray, your passionate blind worship for her to make a mock of ! Not one man in ten thousand, perhaps," said old Klaus, "is capable of loving so. The ten thousand are the men to marry. For him——"

"For him, Klaus ?" said Steven, as the old hunter hesitated.

"Well, Steven, I've got so far, and now I'm a fool. I don't know what to say. For him—don't let him do as I did, that's all! Don't let him go mad for a white neck and meek eyes and snow-soft hand, and never see that they are a wanton's! That the lips were never his, that the eyes lied every time they smiled at him—the hand——"

He got up, mechanically raising his rifle from the ground with him, and leaned upon it motionless for a few minutes; then he turned his face away from Steven and brushed his sleeve across it hastily. "Steven," he said at last, in an altered, strangely softened voice, "I'll tell you what I've thought at times—watching by the fire at night, you understand, or listening, afraid to sleep for the grizzlies, for the cry of the goat-suckers, to tell me that morning was at hand upon the hills: quiet times like these, when something better than the mere passions and discontents of a man's own heart speak aloud to him—I've thought of her, not as my engaged bride, not as my wife, but as she was in her innocence, a little maid of twelve running home from school and laughing back at ~~me~~ across her shoulder in the summer twilight, and felt sure that if there is a life after this (a better one, mind: that backsliding after death is a doctrine against all teaching of nature to my understanding), that woman, white as on her bride-day, must be mine there! A superstition, you'd say, like what the Indians hold of their happy hunting-grounds, or the Mahomedan of his houris, but I wouldn't thank the preacher that would make so much certain to me. What! I've thought, when every winter's snow can bring the dead boughs through to a new April, must it be too high a miracle that death should bring a man's buried love, green and undefiled, into his bosom again? I've thought this, Steven. I think it still. I am not utterly desolate."

This was the ending of poor Klaus's sermon. As he turned and walked slowly away towards the fire, Steven Lawrence watched him, and a flush of eager feeling rose over the young man's face. "And so the story bears no moral after all," he thought. "Dishonoured in his youth, alone in his age, the thought of the woman who betrayed him is still the best remembrance of this world that the old man possesses, the foundation of whatever hope he has for the next. Why with no higher luck than his, the venture, on his

own showing, is worth making. Better suffer with a man's suffering than be happy with an animal's happiness, as I have been till now."

An opinion which a very short experience of civilized life was destined greatly to modify.



CHAPTER II.

FRESH VIOLETS.

5 STEVEN LAWRENCE held staunchly to his determination. Five days later old Klaus, with a weighty heart and dim eyes, was standing alone, watching an outward-bound ship from the quay at Vera Cruz, and one severe May evening, after a quick run of twenty-three days, the 'Oneida,' with Steven Lawrence on board, was steaming up the Solent on her way to Southampton harbour.

I use the word severe intentionally. To men fresh from meridional sun, as were all the passengers on board the 'Oneida,' this "wind of God," with its accompaniments of leaden sky and damp searching mists, was more intensely chilling than Christmas snow and frost, with a stiller atmosphere, would have been. West Indians coming for the first time to England wrapped their great blanket-cloaks round their ears and shoulders, and with blue lips and sinking hearts exchanged remarks together upon the inhuman climate of the country to which their curiosity or their business was bringing them. Englishmen returning, many of them after long exile, home, were sensible that to dream of dear old England under the voluptuous heaven of the tropics is a very different thing to having the east wind of dear old England blowing with oblique cruelty in one's teeth. The captain looked cold, and gave his commands to the call-boy in a rasping short voice and with compressed lips, as though anxious to get as little fog and wind as possible down his throat; the call-boy, a poor little shivering Portuguese, piped out the orders, through his blue swollen fingers, down below; the man at the helm was forced, every quarter of an hour, to call another hand to the wheel while he beat his own numbed arms back to sensation across his chest; the crew, a motley collection of Englishmen and Spaniards, Creoles,

Portuguese, and Mexicans, stood huddled together to leeward, while they warmed themselves, in anticipation, at cheery tavern fires in Southampton and Portsmouth. Only one man besides the captain and the call-boy had courage enough to keep undauntedly upon the bridge ; and this man was Steven. But Steven, in addition to his unusual robustness of constitution, had more in his heart, probably, than any other man on board the 'Oneida.' With love, with keen expectation, acting from the brain upon the circulation, a man is not only mentally callous to external accident of rain or cold ; he is physically shielded from them. To the shivering West Indians, England was simply a mart in which so many affairs had to be transacted in the shortest possible time ; to the Englishmen, landsmen and sailors alike, it was the good old country, of course, but the good old country seen from a thoroughly chilly and prosaic point of view : a harbour for a fortnight, a goal of rest after years of exile, a market in which so much coffee and sugar had to be disposed of before returning to a country fit for human beings to breathe in. To Steven alone England was an El Dorado ! This leaden sky, yonder pale grey strip of land, were the sky and land encompassing all his desire ! He was returning to his own hearth, his own bit of land from which long years had parted him, and to the woman who was to be his wife there. With his blood pulsating hot and fast through his veins, what did it matter to him whether the wind blew from the east or the west ? He was going home, and to Dora Fane. English shores looked fresh and fair as ever, he thought—small, though : how dwarfed everything had grown ; why, the Solent that to his boyish heart had looked so sorrowfully wide when he was sailing away ten years ago, was but a little stream to him, now that he had lived beside the rivers of the New World. The sight of English roofs and spires affected him almost as though they had been familiar friends. He could scarce dispossess himself from the idea that some face he knew *must* be among the crowd of faces that thronged to watch the arrival of the 'Oneida' in the Southampton docks ; and the first chill he had felt that day was when the boat stopped, and he realized definitely that there was no welcome ready for him from any one !

His arrival in England was a matter of the most thorough indifference to all mankind—save porters interested in luggage—he was more utterly alone than he had ever been in Mexican forest or the savannahs and prairies of the west. Does a man, feverish with hope, ever come back to his own country without some such childish disappointment taking away the first keen edge of his excitement as he lands? He gets over it in an hour, of course, but I don't think he ever returns to the flush of happiness with which he watched the white streaks on the cliffs grow more vivid, the roofs and spires assume shape, the crowd upon the pier become each a distinct and individual human face. Landing is like writing the first line of your poem; modelling the first outline of your clay: it puts a dream into form—and breaks it.

Falling in with the crowd, Steven was borne along to the Custom-house; thence, after seeing his luggage to the station, he went to the post-office, and found, to his immense delight, a letter in Miss Fane's hand awaiting him there. He carried it with him into the coffee-room of Radley's hotel; then, with epicurean intention of eking out his pleasure as long as possible, warmed himself beside the blazing fire, and ordered his dinner before opening it. Glossy, gilt-initialled paper, an ambrosial smell, half of roses, half of Russian leather, greeted his senses as he broke open the envelope.

"My dear Mr. Lawrence," it began. "My." The letter he had received with the photograph was only "Dear." What a world of advancement his imagination saw in the pronoun! "We are all so very pleased to hear of your proposed return. The Squire says he is sure, with every belief in Dawes's honesty, that you will make a good twenty-five per cent.—or *fifty*, I forget which, and he is not here for me to ask—more out of the farm, when you take it in your own hands.

"What can you mean when you say 'you fear you will not see much of us?' Do you not know that our house is within two miles of Ashcot, and that we shall see you just as often as you choose to walk over and call on us? Katharine and I are staying in town now with Mrs. Dering, and I write this note, sending it, *as you ask me*, to the post-office, Southampton, to say that we all hope you will

come and see us in Hertford Street, number 122A, directly you return. I make out from Bradshaw that, leaving Vera Cruz on April the 25th, you will reach England about the 20th of May ; but would you mind writing directly you land at Southampton, and then we shall know exactly when to expect you ? I am glad you like the photograph. I have one, on glass, of you that you gave me, do you remember, when you were a boy ? How changed you must be—*hélas !* must not that be true of both of us ?

“Arabella and Katharine (she is a grown-up girl, you know, now, engaged to be married to Lord Petres, and a celebrated London beauty) send very kind remembrances, and I am, dear Mr. Lawrence, sincerely yours,

“DORA FANE.”

Dinner was upon the table at the exact moment that he reached the signature, for Miss Fane's handwriting was lady-like, and Steven's literary powers slow. The sight of a grand cold sirloin of English beef, and a dish of browned potatoes, backed by strong English ale in the pewter, touched the yeoman's heart with irresistible strength of association. And, sitting down at once, his table comfortably drawn up beside the fire, he commenced a meal which would not have disgraced one of Homer's heroes—a meal at which even the waiters of Radley's, accustomed to men's hunger after sea-voyages, looked on open-eyed, and holding their table-napkins tight with wonder.

At the first moment of reading Dora Fane's letter, he had been sensible that some subtle defect, he knew not exactly what, in its tone, had jarred upon him cruelly ; as his dinner went on, the honest malt cheering his heart, the ruddy fire putting new warmth into his veins, he felt assured, not a trace of his fasting dissatisfaction left in him, that it was the kindest, the modestest letter ever penned by a woman's hand. After his meat came rhubarb tart, followed by cheese and radishes, then by a dish of spice nuts, and a bottle of hotel port ; and, by the time Steven had made good progress with his dessert, he felt himself fifty times more in love with Dora Fane than ever. It had been an affair of the imagination hitherto, he said to himself, but now——

He could not, as he felt inclined, open, before men's eyes in a coffee-room, the locket which held her picture (he had bought the trinket in Vera Cruz, and wore it, not as civilized men wear such things, upon his watch-chain, but jealously hidden in his waistcoat pocket); but he could hold the paper again that her little hand had newly touched—could feast his eyes upon the words her heart had bade her write! And as he did so, holding the note between him and the fire, yet not actually reading it—reading, in any form, was not a predilection of Steven's—a postscript which, in his first agitation, or on the appearance of dinner, he had contrived to miss, arrested his attention.

"If you can, telegraph to me from Southampton the exact hour at which we may expect you in Hertford Street, and I will be there to receive you.—D. F."

Dora Fane waiting for him—expecting his message, perhaps, at this moment—and he, like the savage, like the animal that he was, sitting here before the fire, in stupid enjoyment of his wine and nuts, unheeding of her commands. He got up, to the benefit of his bodily health, leaving half of the deep-coloured port in the bottle, paid his bill without a murmur, and sallied forth to the telegraph office, whence the following message from "Steven Lawrence to Dora Fane" was, five minutes later, transmitted:

"Just arrived in Southampton Docks, per 'Oneida.' Shall be with you before nine o'clock. I am grateful for your goodness in writing to me."

After this, an hour or more yet remaining before the train left, he started off for a walk through the streets of Southampton, looking, with the zest of a South Sea Islander, into the shop windows—not quite unmindful of any pretty faces that chanced to stand behind the counter—and gradually fell to speculating whether it might be wise in him to attempt to modify his personal appearance somewhat before presenting himself to his love. She would not, for certain, be a woman to measure a man by his coat and necktie; but were not all women swayed more than men by the frivolities of fashion? Was it not a risk that she should see him for the first time in his transatlantic clothes, with the rough, backwoodsman air of the other world?

Clothes, of course, there was no time to think of. Miss Fane must accept him, perforce, in the rough shooting-suit that he had got before leaving Vera Cruz. Gloves and a tall hat he might buy in five minutes, and he bought them. Horribly these lavender-coloured 'eights' teased him; he had not had a pair of gloves on his hands for the last ten years! Then, a barber's shop immediately confronting the haberdasher's, it occurred to him that shaving off his beard might reduce him, perhaps, to the requisite mean of civilization quicker than any other process, and, crossing the street, he walked in and requested to be shaved at once.

"Shaved plain, sir?" said the polite little barber, glancing up, not without artistic compunction, at Stephen's magnificent growth of beard. "Plain style, sir, or the military—moustache left?"

"Not military, for certain," said Stephen, going into the inner shop, and never giving a look at himself in the glass as he sat down. "I'm a stranger in England, and I want to be shaved English fashion—as countrymen, plain farmers, or the like, wear their beards."

"Oh, very good!" politeness unaltered, but with an octave, at least, of flattery taken out of the barber's voice by the word 'farmer.' "I quite understand you, sir." And in a quarter of an hour a pair of moderate-sized whiskers was all the hair remaining on Steven's face.

I said, when I spoke of him bearded, that nature would scarcely commit the anomaly of allying a weak mouth with the bold blue eyes and resolute forehead of Steven Lawrence. His mouth is the reverse of weak. The lips are full and squarely cut, the chin masculine, and still—still, the story that is graven there is one of physical, far more than of moral strength, after all. An acute student of human expression might accredit the possessor of that mouth with being passionate in love, warm in friendship, generous, fond of life and of his own share in life always: but heroic, never! And he would be right, viewing heroism from the highest, or transcendental point of view. Steven was just a man to be strong one day and weak the next—to commit one right action and three faulty ones immediately afterwards: in a word, was a man not to rule his own life, but be ruled by it, as you will see.

He got up and looked long—a most unwonted thing for him to do—in the glass. How young he was still ! the thought struck him instantly. How like the boy Steven Lawrence, with whom he had had so little to do in later years. The sight of his own beardless face seemed to bring him back far more vividly to England than the fact of treading upon English ground had done. The old house at Ashcot, the kitchen fireside, the little bedroom where his mother died, and where her black-framed picture hung (the room to which he had stolen, the picture he had kissed on the April night when he first ran away to sea)—with passionate reality all the happiness, all the misery of his boyish life, was unlocked before him by this strangely familiar face—his own, at which he stood and looked !

“It does make a difference, doesn’t it?” said the polite barber, rubbing his hands. “If you will permit me, sir, I should advise the hair being cut—machine, latest improvement—considerably shorter. Both the military and the country gentlemen wear the ‘air short to the ‘ead, if I may be allowed the expression.”

Steven submitted passively to being machine-shorn, and brushed and perfumed to the barber’s taste ; then, with his thoughts still very far away, walked along the High Street, looking neither at the shop-windows nor pretty faces now, in the direction of the railway.

Just outside the door of the station a girl of about thirteen stood selling violets ; a girl with a white small face, a shrunken figure, and eyes from whose blue the childhood seemed already to have faded. The moment Steven approached, she singled him out, with the quick instinct of her age, as a man to be cajoled into buying, and, fawning to his side, put up a meagre hand, holding its merchandise, to tempt him.

“Vi’lets, sweet vi’lets, gentleman ! take a bunch to town for your lady, kind gentleman. I gathered ‘em fresh myself this evening. The London vi’lets don’t smell like these, gentleman.”

“Don’t they, indeed ?” said Steven, looking down at her face, and with his deep manly voice becoming marvellously sweet and gentle at the sight of its childish pallor. “Then I suppose I must have yours, for my lady, as you say.”

He took two bunches from the poor little thin hand, and gave the child half-a-crown.

"I've no change, kind gentleman," she whined, looking up at him, and making a pretence of holding the half-crown out for him to take it back.

"No? then you must keep it all for yourself, pretty one," said Steven, cheerily, and putting back her attenuated hand with his own stalwart brown one. "Good-bye."

The child stared in mute wonder after his big figure, until it was lost among the crowd within the doorway. Then she looked at her half-crown; rubbed it bright on her skirt; held it up to the fading evening light; tested it against her lips; finally hid it away in the breast of her ragged frock.

"Easy to see where he comes from," she thought. "Easy to see he's been where they dig the gold. What a fine tall man to have such a kind voice; and he touched *me*—he said good-bye to *me*,"—the colour rising over the pinched, small face. "Oh, ain't he just a flat!"

This was the first definite feminine opinion formed upon Steven Lawrence on his return to England.



CHAPTER III.

THE LIFE OF THE WILDERNESS.

FOR generations back Steven's forefathers—farmers by profession, but not averse, whenever money could be made by it, to horse-dealing, or, indeed (so said tradition), to a little irregular trade in French wines and brandies—had lived upon their own small freehold of land in the sea-board parish of Broad Clithero, Kent. No deed of entail secured to the eldest born son of the Lawrences the rights of primogeniture, but primogeniture, unenforced by law, was as sacred in their family as in the family of any earl of England, as much a part of their social belief as were the doctrines of Wesley of their religion.

When Steven's grandfather died he left two sons : Joshua, the eldest, already looked upon as a confirmed bachelor of forty-five, and Steven, a married man and the father of a boy of eleven—the Steven of this story. "If Joshua marries," the old man said on his death-bed, looking wistfully at the down-cast face of his eldest son—"if Joshua marries, Steven will have to make a home for his wife and Steenie elsewhere, but till then, I'd like them to bide at Ashcot. I've a feeling little Steenie 'll be master here some day, and I'd like him to grow up on the farm in his youth. A man doesn't work the land with the same heart in his middle age if he's been a stranger to it when he was a boy."

And Joshua Lawrence had not only promised that, whether he married or no, Ashcot should be the home of Steven and his family, but had held faithfully to the letter of his word. A year after the old man's death Steven Lawrence was killed by a fall in the hunting field, and Joshua at once took upon himself, as a matter of course, the maintenance of the widow and her boy.

He was a man of few words, sober—unlike the majority of the Lawrences in this!—plain, reserved; a man who courted the society of men little, of women not at all; and young Steven was soon looked upon just as surely as the heir of Ashcot as though Joshua had been his father, not his uncle. With his sister-in-law to keep his house, this boy for his heir, what chance was there that Joshua Lawrence, a woman-hater at thirty, should seek to marry a wife at forty-five? No direct word on the part of Joshua himself had ever confirmed the certainty of Steven's heirship, but Joshua was a man chary of speech on all matters, and the way in which he treated his nephew was more than sufficient proof, so thought the world, and Steven's mother, and Steven himself, to show the place the boy held within his heart. Up to the age of fourteen he was sent, profiting as little as possible by the instruction he received, to a tolerable school in Canterbury. He then at his uncle's side learnt—or rather was perfected in: he had learnt from his infancy—the practical management of the land he already looked upon as his own. He was always well dressed yeoman-fashion; rode to hounds better mounted than half the gentlemen's sons in the county; and held

his handsome face high when he saluted the parson or squire, or even old Lord Haverstock himself in the lanes.

"Every inch a Lawrence," the gossips of the parish used to say as they looked after him, "Joshua was a poor creature—had his mother's blood in him—a man to grudge himself his meat, and die in his bed at last. The boy was of the true Lawrence sort. A chip of the old block, every bit of him." Which, in that neighbourhood, meant a man to live hard and die with a broken neck in a ditch or a broken head in a smuggling fray before fifty. These, tradition had handed down as the orthodox proclivities of the Lawrences; the poor creatures, or men taking after their mothers, being those stray members of the family who kept the farm together and paid for the funeral meats of the Lawrences *pur sang*. Whatever his fate in other respects, Steven learnt when he was within a few weeks of seventeen the exact position in which he stood as regarded Ashcot; learnt it suddenly, his uncle being out in the fields, from the lips of a person in purple satin, who arrived, a little boy in her hand, and informed Mrs. Steven Lawrence and her son that she was "Mr. Joshua's lady."

"Not—not his wife?" faltered the widow, throwing a trembling hand round her son's neck, as the whole vista of his ruined life passed before her. "That—*that* child can never be the heir before Steenie!"

And it was in the mingled torrent of virtue and not unnatural venom that this remark called forth from the invader, that Joshua Lawrence came back from his work across the threshold of his own house. He turned horribly white at seeing these four people in one small room; the pale, indignant-eyed widow, Steven flushed and silent by his mother's side; his own sickly child; the flaunting, gaily-dressed woman, whose dozen of boxes stood already inside the porch. Joshua Lawrence turned white; but he took at once the only side a man of sense ever takes in family discussion—his wife's.

"You might have written, Charlotte, but as you are here you are welcome. Steenie, shake hands with the child. 'Twill make no difference to you, lad. You and your mother will always find a

home at Ashcot as long as I live. You are about in time for dinner, Charlotte."

No difference! How glibly such euphemisms glide from the lips of men seeking to slur over the consequences of their own weakness or their own injustice! The first points, of course, discussed in the neighbourhood as to Joshua Lawrence's marriage were the outside facts of the mystery. Who was this woman? Where had he met her? Why had he married her? Why had he not lived with her? Then, when it was ascertained that there was no mystery at all—that the woman was the widow of a London draper's assistant, that Joshua Lawrence had married her without love or any other intelligible reason (the history of most marriages), had lived apart from her about on the same grounds as he had married her, and had seen her once a fortnight when he went up to Leadenhall Market during the last dozen years or so—the interest turned to the dispossessed heir, young Steven: Steven, to whom the advent of a legitimate wife and son at Ashcot was to make "no difference." And from old Lord Haverstock down to the lowest ploughman on the farm there was not a heart that did not bleed for the lad under the new position in which he found himself.

He took his fate with a sullen, hard sort of resignation which, at his age, did not augur particularly well for the future. On the morning after 'Charlotte's' arrival, he went up to his uncle's side in the fields and asked him what kind of wages his services on the farm were about worth? "I'm a servant now, and I don't want to pretend to be a master. Young Josh may have my gun, and my pony, and the rest of it. Play is over for me. Working as I can work, shall I still, without wronging your family, be able to keep my mother at Ashcot?"

Joshua Lawrence was cut to the quick with contrition. He had married—because he had married! and had done Steven infinite injustice in allowing him through all these years to be looked upon as his heir. But weakness had been his worst sin. In his heart he was a just and not an ungenerous man, and the thought of Steenie working as a servant on the old farm brought tears, for the first time since he was a child, into the yeoman's eyes. Steven was no more a

servant than little Josh. There was no reason why the farm shouldn't one day be shared between them alike. Let the boys live together as brothers, and Charlotte and Jane help each other in housekeeping. With more of the same platitude which men are wont to talk when they would throw oil on the troubled waters of family jealousy and family discord.

Power went, as it always does, into the hands of its legitimate claimants. In six months Steven slouched to his daily work, dressed like a labourer, and young Josh was riding his pony about the country. In six months the keys, one by one, had passed over to Charlotte, and the greater part of the widow's time was spent in her bedroom in tears and wishes, with which she cheered young Steven of an evening, that she was lying in Clithero churchyard at her husband's side. She was a woman of feeble imagination, and in time probably would have submitted to the prospect of an impoverished future for her boy and herself, if a little bit of present rule had only been left to her in the household. What she could not get over was the loss of the keys. As one by one of these insignia of office were wrested from her, she would at first faintly expostulate with her brother-in-law, who always promised and never dared to speak to Charlotte about it; then she gave up with 'only the meek irony that she "hoped Mrs. Joshua would mend the linen and make the preserves last as well as she had done." Finally, when the last shred of power was gone from her, took, as I have said, to her bedroom, and to infusing into young Steven's cup a yet bitterer draught than that which his own galled heart already gave him to drink.

This state of things lasted over a twelvemonth; then poor Mrs. Steven's wish was accomplished, and a neat funeral procession, for Joshua was a just man in everything, conveyed her from the farm to her husband's side in Clithero churchyard. Steven read immense resignation on every face in the house—indecently unconcealed on Mrs. Lawrence's and Josh's! veiled, but none the less real, on his uncle's—to the cross which, in the family prayers, they acknowledged to have been laid upon them. And before his mother had been twenty-four hours buried, had begun to form his own plans of escape from the home to which neither duty nor affection bound him now.

The Californian gold fever was at that time still at its height. Spelling over his uncle's *Sunday Times* a fortnight old, by the fire in the long evenings, the boy read of fortunes made, fortunes that would buy up Ashcot, ay, and the squire's land too, in a few weeks, and with no help, no interest, save a man's own stout right arm. What was there to hinder him, if he could reach this El Dorado, from digging nuggets as big as other men's? Was he to spend his life as a labourer on his cousin's farm, when beyond the sea wealth, power, pleasure, were to be wrested from the earth with scarce an effort more than it had cost them to grub up the quickset hedge down in the five-acres?

After a good many sleepless nights, and when, by dint of studying his old geography books, he had mastered, approximately, where California lay, Steven ventured to sound his uncle on the subject. So much gold had been dug by one man; so much by two brothers; so much by a gang of five. As Josh would have the farm, and—hanging his head—as there was no one much to care about his absence now, wouldn't it be as well to see if his strong shoulders might bring about better fortune in another country than it was ever possible for them to yield him here at home?

Joshua Lawrence's answer was a brief one. His temper had soured wonderfully under his wife's rule: and his never-dying sense of the injury he had done Steven, made him peevishly averse at all times to discussing the lad's future prospects. Emigration and gold digging were the last resource of blackguards. He did not know the Lawrences had sunk to that yet. If Steven couldn't brook the thought of young Josh sharing the land with him, he must go into trade. Old Wandsworth, the chandler, at Canterbury, wanted an apprentice, and he would not mind paying a good premium, if Steven had a mind for the business. As to California, or any other foreign part, he forbade such a word ever being mentioned in his presence again.

It was one Sunday morning on their way to the meeting-house that this conversation took place. On the evening of the next day, a fresh April evening—the smell of the child's violets recalls it to him now!—Steven Lawrence stole away from Ashcot, as he believed, for ever.

In the day, while his uncle believed him cheerfully at work among the men, his heart had taken leave of every wood, every field about the farm. As evening came on he had managed on some excuse or another to have a word with each of the labourers as he was leaving work. When his cousin went to bed had followed the child wistfully from the parlour and given him a many-clasped knife that Josh had long coveted with hot envy to possess. Bitter as was his hatred for his life, resolute as was his determination of severing himself from it, Steven had but a boy's heart still, and when the first sharp step was taken—when he had got clear from the farm, and stood looking from the high-road down upon the old house and garden bathed in soft spring moonlight—the tears rained hot and fast down the cheek of this bold adventurer who was to conquer wealth and fortune with his own strong arm beyond the seas.

He reached San Francisco with the very worn clothes he stood in, and the sum of eight shillings in his pocket : his father's watch and a few poor trinkets of his mother's having, with his own work, just sufficed to pay his passage out. Eight shillings, his broad shoulders, handsome face, and the heart of a child. What a stock in trade for a lad set adrift, at eighteen, in the gold diggings ! the last resource, as Joshua Lawrence, narrowly but unjustly, had remarked, of all the greatest blackguards in the world.

Need I describe the kind of El Dorado that Steven had in reality fallen upon ? How he starved and feasted alternately ? How he worked, and was robbed, openly, then under the guise of dice or cards : one time at the diggings themselves, the next after he had brought back his gold to Francisco, or Sacramento. The boyishness, I need scarcely tell you, was soon knocked out of him : the manhood, I know not by what miracle, never. Associating with the veriest scum of civilization, from the broken-down Parisian or New York gambler to the most ruffianly of all roughs, the cosmopolitan "shoulder-striker" of Californian cities, something in the robust yeoman blood of Steven Lawrence kept him an Englishman, I nearly wrote an English gentleman, still. With cowardice and dishonesty part of the very air he breathed ; familiarized with such scenes as only gross ignorance, vice, and newly-gotten gold allied can generate ;

Steven, however else he erred, was loyal in courage and in honour to his better nature still. Perhaps a certain constitutional slowness, both of mind and body, went far to save him. A quick-brained, lissom-fingered, town-bred man falls easier, perforce, into the habits of city blackguardism, than a man whose country-nurtured perceptions receive temptation slowly, and whose robust hands are physically better adapted for digging gold in bulk out of the earth, than for filching it, stamped, out of the pockets of others. He made no fortune, as many worse men did ; was not singularly unlucky, yet never belonged to a gang that came upon any unwonted vein of metal ; and the enormous price of provisions, joined to robbery of every kind, usually left him in a condition of infinitely less comfort than the poorest labourer on his uncle's farm at Ashcot.

So went by four years. Then Steven fell in with old Klaus, and, in a few weeks, had exchanged the fever of gold-seeking and tainted atmosphere of Sacramento gambling-rooms for the air of the broad prairies, the wholesome austere life of a hunter in the wilderness. Their first meeting happened thus : Klaus, like many another old backwoodsman at that time, had been tempted down into California, more, in his case, from curiosity than from any real thirst to join the gold-seekers, and, one night, as he was going back to his shanty, on the outskirts of Sacramento city, found a man senseless, and bleeding fast to death, in his path. The man was Steven. Coming out from one of the gambling-houses, of which latterly he had become a too-constant frequenter, a street fight had arisen, the sorry history of which would ill befit these pages, and Steven, a champion of weakness, however lost, however degraded, had thrown himself, without stopping to reason, upon the losing side. The result was a wound from a bowie-knife in his side, a stunned head, the loss of whatever money he had about him, and Klaus's friendship ! A man does not go to the help of forlorn womanhood, even amidst the offscouring of Californian streets, without some reward.

Klaus, helped by a stray Samaritan or two, bore on his helpless burthen a couple of hundred yards to his shed ; bound up his wounds ; laid him on his own scanty portion of straw ; gave him cold water to drink throughout the night ; and, early next morning, called in a

surgeon to look at him. It was a bad case, said the man of science, and if, as was probable, the lad was given to drink, 'twould end fatally ; and returned no more. But Klaus, like most old hunters, not unversed in leechcraft, thought differently. The lad did not look to him like one given to drink, and for certain, thought the old German, as he looked at Steven's comely limbs and handsome face, was a lad worth holding, if he could be held, to life.

And so, in unconscious helplessness on one side, in purest compassion on the other, began their intimacy. When Steven, after a fierce life and death struggle, got back something of his strength, Klaus carried him away at once down the river, south.

"You have missed your vocation, friend," he said quietly, as they stood together on the steamer's deck, watching the last buildings of the town fade into distance. "You'll be more at home in my life, among the bears and panthers, than in defending one set of *spitz-buben* against another in the streets of Sacramento. As to fortune, you'll make that nowhere ! Men of your measure don't."

And Klaus on both points was right. Steven was not a man destined to make his fortune. The warfare of the woods—the science of the deer stalker or the still hunter—was far more suited to his capacity than were any of the contests by which men gain pre-eminence over their fellows in the crowded arenas of civilization. Nature had endowed him with no common powers of endurance, with a heart insensible to danger, with love that was a passion for all free, out-of-door life, and with sufficiently quick perceptions to learn the higher intricacies of the science of woodcraft. With loneliness to sharpen these perceptions to the uttermost, with Klaus for his master, and for his school the prairies and forest of Texas—with occasional migrations for wild fowl to the cane-breaks of Louisiana, or the gulfs of Northern Mexico—the Kentish lad made himself, as years went on, a name mighty even in regions where all men, by birth and by education alike, are hunters. He was no amateur, no gentleman sportsman, killing big game by way of fresh excitement in American forests. Not a dollar of his Californian gold remained : not a shilling was ever remitted to him from the old home in England : Steven Lawrence earned his bread by his gun, as Klaus did,

and in every respect lived the life of an ordinary professional hunter. To a gentleman (unless you call old Klaus one) he never spoke ; a lady he never saw, except when they went into cities to sell their game, and beautiful American girls, with rose and white skins, and gorgeous Parisian dresses, floated, as impossible visions only, before the young fellow's sight ! But for spelling aloud a chapter out of his pocket Bible every Sunday morning--when they had kept count of the days--he would probably have lost the art of reading altogether ; for books were rare objects in the wilderness, and Steven, never fond of study, submitted with perfect resignation to their absence.

About twice in three years he despatched a letter home ; a letter written in text hand and phonetic spelling, and excessively brief, not because any ill-feeling rankled in his heart still, but because writing was really a herculean labour, both of head and hand, to him. "Not the writing, or the spelling, Klaus," he would say, "though they are the deuce ; but the matter. What heads fellows must have who can fill their three and four pages, as some do, every Christmas, and even oftener."

In return three letters, sent under cover always to a friend of Klaus's in New Orleans, reached him from his family during the first nine-and-a-half years of his exile ; each of which letters announced a death. The first was from Joshua Lawrence, the sole occasion on which he ever wrote to his nephew ; a short, dry letter, saying it had pleased heaven that his Charlotte should be taken from him, and that whenever Steven chose to give up his evil courses, a place at the old fireside was ready for him. Young Josh was well, but not as steady at his work as could be wished. Josh's heart was not in the land, and he never seemed happy unless he was running up to London now. If Steven returned, it would be for Josh's advantage that they should undertake the management and the profits of the farm together between them before his death, an event which he did not believe was very far distant.

The next was from Josh himself, written in a feeble schoolboy hand, on inch-deep mourning paper, to inform his dear cousin that "the Lord had seen fit to deprive him of the *best of parents*, that his

father having left no will the estate was now his to an acre, and that he was very glad to think his dear cousin was getting on so comfortably in America. Would it be a *great trouble* to send him over some bear skins ? et cetera. He was going to fit up the south bedroom (once Mrs. Steven's) as a *sangtom*, and would like bear skins to lay down before the fireplace, as he had seen at young Lord Haverstock's."

What a *sangtom* was, Steven no more thought of asking himself than he thought of sending the skins that were to match Lord Haverstock's. His uncle was dead ; his last friend gone ; the last link that in any way bound him to the old life, broken. He walked about with his rifle, wearing a solemn face than usual for a few days ; put some crape round his sombrero as soon as he got near enough to a town to buy it ; wrote a few lines to Josh—neither bitter nor contemptuous ones : men to whom orthography is an abstruse science always choose affection as the easiest mode of expressing themselves—then went on silently with his accustomed employments as usual.

The wilderness was, in very fact, his home now, he felt. Up to the present time some unacknowledged hope had ever knitted his heart to England still. In mid-day forest quiet, or watching alone beside the fire at night, he had been haunted by visions of living on the old farm, of standing by a grave in the old church-yard before he died. All this was over. Every acre was Josh's. This Isaac, six years younger than himself, whose heart was "not in the land," and who was fitting up the old farm-house after the pattern of Lord Haverstock's, had got the farm, for good and all, now. And he was Ishmael. Was it a man's part to fret after one rood of the land that he had lost ? Were not these oceans of prairie, this wilderness of forest, this unchecked savage liberty, more than compensation for the poor little Kentish freehold of which he had missed the possession ?

By the time he had thoroughly brought himself not only to believe in, but to be consoled by, this philosophy, came another black-edged letter, directed in a strange, lawyer's hand, to tell him that he was in fact, as years before he had been in imagination, the master of Ashcot. Young Joshua, still weak from a recent attack of illness, had been upset from his dog-cart as he was driving a tandem home

from Canterbury one Sunday night, and killed on the spot. Mr. Steven Lawrence's instructions would be awaited respecting the administration of the estate, and Francis Dawes, his late uncle's head man, would be kept on to look after the farm until his return.

This letter was followed, much to Steven's discomfiture, by half a score of others. People who had forgotten the outcast adventurer, or remembered him as the typical prodigal of the Lawrence family, seemed not alone to have got back clearest recollection of him now, but resolved to make his life miserable by continual reading and writing. The solicitor wrote long-winded business letters to him, and received a curt reply that Dawes might carry on the business of the farm at present; he, Steven, had no intention of leaving America, and very probably would decide on selling the estate. Then came strange hieroglyphics from Dawes himself; then a sermon from the Wesleyan minister, setting forth before his absent parishioner the duties that he would discharge to himself and to society by living like a Christian man on his own land (to which Steven, out of patience with all this letter writing, answered, in careful round text, that "he hoped he knew how to live like a Christian man *anywhere*.") Then Dora Fane wrote to him, for old friendship's sake, and enclosing the picture of a beautiful face, and graceful girlish throat, and five weeks after he got her letter, Steven, as you know, was taking his ticket for London at the Southampton railway station.

You have heard his raptures over her photograph on the Mexican forest side. Now for the living picture, as it was to appear before him in the velvet-hung wax-lit drawing-room of 122, Hertford Street, May Fair!



CHAPTER IV.

TOO LATE!

"HALF-PAST eight, Katharine, and he says in his message—what a message! who on earth before was ever obliged and grateful by telegraph—that he will be 'with me' before nine. In another ten minutes, I suppose, this wild man of the woods will be here. Now

mind you don't go away—whatever you do, mind you don't go away for an instant. I wouldn't be left alone with Steven Lawrence—oh, not for the world !”

And as she said this, Dora Fane gave, or pretended to give, a shudder at the horrible image which her own words had called forth before her imagination.

She was a pretty, excessively little woman, somewhat under thirty in reality, twenty-two at the first glance, and viewed from her own focus. Perhaps the word little hardly conveys a sense of her proportions. She was not remarkably short, but small-made almost to the verge of dwarfishness, tiny head, atoms of feet and hands, atoms of features, ears little pink shells, the waist of a child of eleven. Nothing large about her but a pair of great bead-black eyes and her voice, which was at once voluminous and penetrating, a voice that could make itself heard at any time from one end to the other of a ball-room, or straight across from box to box, in a crowded theatre. Her hair, of a copper-like shade, not wholly true to nature, was cropped short, and dressed in little soft baby curls round her head ; her complexion, in the right focus, was wonderfully carnation and white ; jet black brows the thickness of a line, and a faint bluish darkness round her large eyes, contrasted artistically with the fair colouring of the rest of the head. Like most very little women, Dora loved large ornaments. A pair of ear-rings, constructed, according to the last beautiful Paris fashion, to look like ladders, hung from her ears to her shoulders ; a buckle that would have been large on a larger woman, but on her was a breast-plate, glittered at her mite of a waist ; and her fingers were covered with rings that, being designed for normally-sized hands, gave Dora the look of a child acting “grown-up people” at its mother's dressing-table.

“Just the sort of beauty to dazzle this poor savage man,” she thought, as she stood tiptoe, before the fire, and glanced, with one little hand resting on the crimson velvet of the mantel-piece, at herself in the glass. “He may have seen plenty of girls like Katharine—the American women have that sort of beauté du diable they say. No man could ever see a woman like *me* out of London or Paris !” Then aloud, “You hear me, Katharin? You'll be

sure not to leave Steven Lawrence and me for one moment alone together."

"Well, yes, I hear, Dot," answered Katharine Fane, who, in a Cinderella morning dress, was sitting on a low stool by the fireside, and as she spoke a pair of serene fawn-coloured eyes were raised slowly to Dora's. "I hear, but I don't understand. Of course it was quite right that I should stay at home to chaperon you and Stev—I beg his pardon, and Mister Lawrence—but as to leaving you alone . . . Dot, with every confidence in your ability, let me give you one piece of advice. Don't, as I'm afraid it's your nature to do, Dot, dear, over-act with Steven Lawrence. Because a man has spent ten years or so in the woods of America, it does not necessarily follow that he should be a perfect fool, you know. After the kind of letters that have passed between Steven Lawrence and you, it seems to me a great deal more honest and natural, and everything else, that you *should* be left alone. I look upon you already——"

"In the same light that you look upon yourself and Lord Petres?" cried Dot, as the girl hesitated. "Is that what you would say?"

The great shining eyes sank down and gazed intently into the fire again. "I would be perfectly honest with the poor fellow, Dot, if I were in your place. Acting and counter-acting, holding out encouragement one day, feigning reserve the next, may be very well in the kind of world and with the men you and I have had to do with. But with this man—I don't know why—something tells me that 'twould be best to be sincere. Do you know, Dot," abruptly, "I like this poor Steven, his telegram, and his letters and all, wonderfully?"

"His letters!" cried Dot, with her ringing laugh. "What, the spelling, or the composition, or what?"

"I like the heart of them," said Katharine Fane. "All the men I have known could spell and compose too—if you call it composition—but none of their letters ever touched me like the one this poor fellow wrote to you from Mexico. I think the way in which he thanked you for your photograph was charming, Dot—oh, yes, spelling and grammar and all! To think of a man, after ten years of absence, being touched, as he was, by seeing the picture of the woman he had loved when he was a boy!"

Dora Fane took her hand from the mantel-piece and raised a scrap of Mechlin lace that it held to her lips. "Katharine," she said, when a minute or two had passed by silently, "do you think, really, there's any truth in what some people say about our being alike? Now, on your honour—I've a particular reason for asking you this to-night."

"Our being alike!" cried Katharine with a start. "Heavens, Dot, how far away I was just then! Well, you know some people do see a likeness. Who was it—Lord Petres?—no, Mr. Clarendon Whyte—said the other day there was a strong family likeness in the turn of the upper lip. What in the world made you think of that now?"

"Oh, nothing particular! just a fancy of mine. We're not alike in reality, and when you see us together of course, because you're twice my size, and—and paler and stouter," added Dot, looking consciously at the reflection of her own small face in the glass. "But, as far as feature goes—now, don't you think it quite possible that a photograph of you might be taken for me by any one who didn't know us well?"

"By any one who didn't know us, certainly. A photograph of mine, or of yours, might be taken for Bella, or the Phantom! by any one who didn't know us. What *are* you asking all this for, Dot? Are you afraid Steven Lawrence will think me more like your portrait than you are yourself, and insist upon being in love with the wrong Dulcinea? Set your mind at rest, Dot. A man like Lawrence would not be likely——"

"To set his affections so high!" interrupted Dot. "No, I suppose not,—thanks for the compliment, though, Katharine dear! But I am not at all afraid," perching herself on a footstool so as to command a fuller view of her own dainty image. "I think you a classic beauty, you know, Katharine. Hyacinth eyes, and Naiad hair—no, Naiad eyes and Hyacinth hair (what is that thing Clarendon Whyte repeats of the Poet—Shelley, is it? who wrote about baboons murdering people and putting them up the chimney?). But still, in my own humble way, I would rather be Dora than Katharine Fane any day. Now look at me, Katharine, look at me, and say if I'm not looking my best to-night? Isn't the pearl-grey silk,

and the knot of crimson velvet in my hair, perfection? Look at me and say quite frankly, if there be anything that *could* add to my appearance at this moment!" And she turned herself slowly round, as the pivoted figures in the shop windows turn, for her cousin's approval; then, with her tiny hands in a posture, her great eyes wide open, and her red lips in a pretty attitude of repose, stood waiting for a reply.

Katharine looked at her attentively: the fluffy short hair, the scarlet cheeks, the enormous ornaments, the tiny hands, the yard-and-a-half skirt, more than half of which lay outspread behind Dora Fane upon the hearthrug.

"Dot," she said at last, "you're a beautiful little woman." Dot's eyes brightened. From man or woman, from duke or dressmaker, any incense to her beauty could make this doll's heart beat with rapture. "I always have thought, always shall think you the prettiest little creature in every ball or theatre or assembly of any kind where I see you. But to-night—now don't take it amiss, Dot—to-night I should like you better if you looked a little less, if—if you had just a shade less of colour in your cheeks! It makes you look hectic, Dot. It makes you look *ol—less* young, dear, than you do when you are pale. Now, you won't be cross with me for saying this?"

"Less colour! why I have been standing before the fire," cried Dot with dignity. "I get like this always at night, Katherine, as you know; I'm consumptive—if you could feel how my poor cheeks are burning now! It is not every one that admires a complexion of *stone*, you must remember, Kate."

"No, Dot, I only said what I thought, I only meant——"

"Oh well! of course I can go into a cooler room," interrupted Dot, walking away towards the door. "Of course I can bathe my poor flushed cheeks, and try to bring them up to the standard of classic pallor before Mr. Lawrence comes. Only one thing, please Katherine—the moment you hear a double knock, come as quick as you can up to my room. I don't want you to be the first—I mean, I could never have courage to come down by myself and find the man waiting here alone for me."

The tiny figure swept out of the room, and Katharine Fane went back to her old attitude, her old contemplation of things "far away," in the glowing heart of the fire. In a close-fitting brown dress, with plain bands of white linen at her throat and wrists, not a brooch nor an ornament of any kind, her hair pushed back carelessly from her forehead, the celebrated London beauty—the syren who had led so many men to their ruin—looked fairer than she had ever looked at court ball, in silk and roses, and with a throng of slaves at her feet ; for an unwonted light was in Katharine's eyes ; an unwonted feeling made the beautiful lips serious as well as sweet.

For the first time in her life she was about to be brought, not at second hand, as in operas and novels, but into direct contact with the romance all her monitors and all her experience had taught her to laugh at, yet which her inmost heart so passionately believed in still. This man, this peasant they were waiting for, was "in love" with Dora. Her eyes softened, her pulses thrilled at the thought. Love ! Poor little Dora [with the wax-doll face, wax-doll heart, was standing (prettily painted, and busy at this moment with rice powder) on the threshold of the great mystery, and she—was engaged to Lord Petres ! and had wide vistas of dress, diamonds, dinners, carriages, and opera boxes, before her. There was the difference.

A double knock came at the house door ; and Katharine Fane, ordinarily the most collected woman living, rose hurriedly to her feet, and, forgetting Dot's commands and Dot's existence, stood and waited with a beating heart beside the fire. There was a light quick foot-fall upon the stairs : then the door opened and closed ; and Steven, pale with excitement—handsomer, nobler, she thought, even in this second, than any man whom she had ever known—stood before her.

She moved towards him, with an outstretched hand, with parted lips, and he caught her abruptly in his arms and kissed her.

"I—Mr. Lawrence !" she exclaimed, freeing herself, too late, from his clasp. "I—I—you have mistaken. I am Katharine Fane."

Too late ! The epitome of the whole story I have to tell is written in those two words.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIGHT FACE.

STEVEN loosened his hold mechanically, but his heart refused, as yet, to take cognizance of its mistake ; a mistake, in the common drawing-room comedy called love, to vary, pleasantly than otherwise, the trite unravelling of the time-worn plot, but which, for the yeoman, was just the ruin, the overthrow, of his whole life.

"Katharine !" he repeated, as if he had not understood her, and gazing steadily at the perfect face that so far surpassed his dreams, "how good you have been to me ! What have I done that you should treat me with such goodness ?"

"Mr. Lawrence," said Katharine Fane, gently, for it was not in her to be aught but gentle, yet with as much stately coldness as she could command, "I must repeat that you are mistaking me for my cousin Dora. She will be down directly—we received your telegram an hour ago, and expected you already. Dora is looking very well. You will scarce see a change in her, I should think. Come near the fire, will you not, please ? After your beautiful Mexico, how cold these English east winds must seem to you !" And she walked back, calm and self-possessed to the fireside ; thence invited Steven with a gesture of her hand to approach her.

He came up, spoke never a word, but stood and looked at her still ; looked at her until, with all the experience gained during the two last London seasons, Katharine Fane's eyes sank, and her heart began to beat thick and fast. Placed with a man of the world in this ridiculously awkward position, she had freed herself from it by a single word, a word lightly spoken but impossible to misconstrue ; with any other man of Steven Lawrence's condition she would, his lips having desecrated hers, his eyes bringing hot blushes into her cheek, have rung the bell and ordered his condign expulsion, then and for ever, from the house. But with this poor savage, his beautiful face, his childish passionate admiration of her, his utter disregard of her explanations, appealing to her as a child's, a dog's mute elo-

quence might have done, how was it possible for her to feel otherwise than generous and forgiving! She was in a position the like of which had never tried her worldly knowledge or her pride till now; she stood face to face before a human creature she had had scant dealing with during her twenty-one years of life—a man, simple, honest, terribly in earnest, and for whom her instinct told her a bitter awakening was at hand—and so, instead of attempting to put him in his place, instead of attempting anything, she simply lifted up her head and smiled. (To his last hour Steven could never forget how she smiled!) “I was a very little girl when you went away, Mr. Lawrence, but it seems to me now that I remember you. I remember you gave me a bunch of primroses the last evening Dora and I ever saw you. How pleasant it is to think of old days like those! I am very glad that you have come back to England for good!”

Her voice, her kindness, a certain dawning pity in her eyes, woke Steven to the truth.

“I have been a fool,” said he, bluntly, “and now I have just to ask your forgiveness and go. Miss Fane, I have been misled, I see, by my stupidity, or through the cruellest of mistakes. I returned—shall I shame to own it?—for the sake of Dora Fane, and I find——”

“You will find,” cried Katharine, earnestly, “you will find Dora Fane the dearest, the most charming little creature in the world! I speak warmly of my cousin, Mr. Lawrence, and you will see that I do not over-estimate her. We are somewhat like each other, I think”—here she shrank again from the expression of his eyes—“only Dora is fairer and smaller—I always say younger-looking; however, in a moment you will see her. How time passes! Can it really be ten years since you and Dora last met?”

Steven Lawrence took a locket from his pocket, unfastened its clasp, and held it out open to Katharine. “This picture that Dora Fane sent me is of you,” he said, “and is as like you as a flat surface without colour and without life can be like a woman. If I lived for a hundred years and might speak to you daily, Miss Fane, I should never make you know what the possession of this little photograph has been to me during the last six weeks.”

She took the locket from his hand, and in a second the blood flushed crimson in Katharine's face ; the photograph was of her. The instinct of the poor savage was true ; he had returned for her, and no other, and had found her—thus !

"This is a most absurd mistake, Mr. Lawrence. Dora is so desperately careless she never can do or say anything without making a mistake of some kind. Luckily, this one can be easily rectified," with a little laugh. "Leave your locket with me, Mr. Lawrence, and come for it to-morrow morning. The right face shall be in it then, I will promise you."

"The right face is in it now," said poor Steven. "Thank you," as she passively let him take it from her hands. "Whatever happens, I suppose I have your leave to wear it, haven't I ?"

Before Katharine Fane could give the decided negative this question deserved, the door opened, and Dot, luminous in the pearl-grey silk, and holding a taper light so that it shone with artistic concentration on the knot of crimson velvet in her hair, appeared there.

"Here is Dora !" cried Katharine, leaving her impending refusal for ever unspoken. "Mr. Lawrence, I don't think there needs any introduction between you and my cousin Dora ?"

Steven turned, and before he had time to collect his thoughts the little figure was at his side, a little white hand, boneless like a baby's, in his. "I am so glad to see you !" cried Dot, in her unmodulated voice. "We expected you an hour ago, and were afraid—weren't we, Katharine ?—an accident must have happened to the train, or that the telegraph-wires were wrong, or something. Now, when did you arrive ? Oh, to-day, of course—how silly I am ! I mean, had you a good passage ! We saw the last West Indian mail had yellow fever on board, and were so frightened about it, Mr. Lawrence."

"We had no yellow fever, I thank you," said Steven, "and we had a fair wind till two days ago, when it shifted to the north-east. I believe it was the quickest passage that has been made from Vera Cruz this year."

"And—and you feel yourself at home in England ?" said Dot, looking up, not without admiration, at the yeoman's muscular figure and bronzed face. "You are not a bit changed, Mr. Lawrence, not

a bit. I see you just as you were that last day at Clithero, yes, even to the bunch of violets at your button-hole."

And Dot laughed—the terrible laugh that was so incongruously disproportioned to that little throat of hers—and stretched out her morsel of a hand towards Steven's violets.

He took them from his button-hole, and flung them into the grate. "They are withered, Miss Fane," said he, shortly. "As I was going into the station at Southampton I saw a child with a basketful of them, and, for old days' sake, I suppose, I took a bunch. They are dead. They have no smell now."

"Ah, you are spoilt by all your grand exotics! Arums and cactus and things—I've seen them in the glass-house at Kew. You won't care for our poor English flowers after all you have been accustomed to in the tropics."

"Arums and cactus are flowers with no smell at all, Miss Fane," remarked Steven, with grim truthfulness; "and among all the plants in the world I've never met with any that give a better smell than English violets. Are you fond of flowers?" and he turned to Katharine again. "I've brought over some hardy Mexican plants with me, that I believe with care I shall bring to thrive on the sunny side of Ashcot. Are you interested in such things, or do you care for nothing of any sort out of London?"

"If I do I must have a bad time of it," said Katharine Fane; "considering that I spend two months, at most, of the year in London, and the rest at Clithero. Surely you don't think Dora and I have grown into London fine ladies, do you, Mr. Lawrence? Nothing would interest me more than your plants; you must ask us over to Ashcot, please, as soon as we are all down in Kent, to see them."

"Oh, *yes!*" cried Dot, with effusion. "I do so love flowers—" which was true, as the trimming of ball-dresses—"I should take the greatest interest in studying botany with any one who could teach it me pleasantly. Katharine is so clever, she can remember the Latin names, and everything: but that's all beyond me. Now do tell us, in English though, about the beautiful plants you have seen. What can a South American forest be like?" clasping up her small hands.

"What would I give to see all the wonders you have, Stev—Mr. Lawrence, I mean!"

"There's a grand Mexican picture of Bierstadt's in the Exhibition this year," said Katharine's soft voice; "a picture of some old city seen at sunrise through a vista of overhanging forest trees. I stood before it yesterday, and wondered whether such forms and colours could possibly be true to nature. You must come with us and tell me, Mr. Lawrence. You will be in town for some time? No? well, nothing is easier now than to run up from Clithero for the day. It's a good season in everything, except east winds; the exhibitions are first-rate; the prince and princess go everywhere, and Patti is singing. If you stayed we should not let you be idle, I can tell you! General Dering and my sister are so lazy, and Dot and I are for ever in want of an escort."

Katharine's was a voice that nature had filled with lavish music, and when, as now, it was her pleasure to throw into it a certain veiled cadence of half-distant, half-familiar tenderness, no man, whatever his age or condition, had yet been known to resist its charms. The yeoman was no exception to the common rule. Five minutes ago, smarting under his first intolerable disappointment, he had fully made up his mind to rush away from Katharine and from England, from all women and from all civilization, for ever. In less than an hour's time he found himself talking in this pleasant amber fire-light—Katharine's smile and voice leading him sweetly along the downward path where they had led so many a wiser man before him—just as unrestrainedly as he had ever talked beside the camp-fire in lonely American forests to old Klaus. Reason, had he listened to reason, would have said to him, "You have been a fool; have made a fool's error; retrieve it. The beautiful siren face, the touching voice, are sold to a man whose fortune and whose birth entitle him to the possession of such things, and are being put forth now for the benefit of the cousin, the little loud-tongued woman, who, by reason of her waning youth and want of dower, may stoop to marry you. Have done with them: explain openly your folly, if you will, or be silent; but have done with them. Leave them, in all honour, as it is in your power to do still, and go on with your life just as if Katharine's

rine Fane's face was not hid away in your breast and in your heart !”

But Steven was pre-eminently a man to be led by his senses rather than by his brain in everything ; and, besides, what did he know of well-bred women or of the well-bred world ? How should he tell that these soft looks, and pleasant words, and graceful smiles, were a science in which, at one and twenty, Katharine Fane chanced to be an adept ?

Already her eyes sank as she looked at him, already the colour flushed into her delicate waxen cheek at his voice ; at one moment she would question him with animated voice, with hearty interest, about his wanderings, at the next speak (as if they were old familiar friends) of Ashcot and of the pleasant country life that lay before them all down in Kent—Dot playing an admirable second through-out—and Steven was in Paradise !

His kiss, let me add, upon those perfect lips was fresh in his memory still.



CHAPTER VI.

KATHARINE.

SHE was one of those rarely-gifted women whom all men think beautiful. No class opinions could have weight in judging of Katharine Fane ; the fair proportions that Rotten Row and the drive went wild about, artists and sculptors coveted as a model ; the face that Descou and Elise vied with each other to adorn in the last new Parisian bonnet, a poet could worship as the throne of pure and simple womanhood still. How shall I describe her ? how, by barren category of feature, bring before you the breathing, winning, erring woman, who was to be the happiness and misery of Steven's life ? A woman, of whose face the best photograph was but a caricature ; and, in whose exceeding beauty the mere outward perfection of line and colour was the poorest part !

She was tall, without looking her height, and somewhat largely

made ; a waist short and nobly proportioned ; marble-fair arms and bust ; hands requiring six-and-three-quarters in gloves, but of unrivalled shape ; and a foot that women allowed to be her best point. A little head, well poised above the round white throat ; golden-brown hair that waved by nature ; golden brown eyes, large, clear, and set in Juno-like serenity beneath the pensive brows ; full lips, parted even in repose ; a skin delicate as the petals of a Provence rose, and almost as devoid of colour I could go on with the category, but never bring Katharine Fane herself before you ! It was the smile, the voice, the sweet indescribable womanliness of this woman, that made her what she was ; the rare unison of charms that neither page nor canvas can seize, and that gives even to the memory of some women such undying fragrance ! When Mary lured on her train of victims to their doom, must not something more than beauty have shone from her face ? Has any picture, has any history, given us a clue to the witchcraft of the fatal queen ?

People who disliked her—there were very few in the world who did so—called Katharine Fane a consummate actress ; every look, every gesture, every word from a woman like that must be artificial, they said. And the generalization was about as shallow as the majority of generalizations. Miss Fane was a consummate actress ; yet was each one of her looks, words and gestures the perfection of nature. Unless you go to the Redskins, perhaps (and they are a good deal hidden by their ochres), you will never find such outward lack of artifice as in a woman of Katharine Fane's type—never, that is to say, find nature so well selected and so well combined by art. Does a painter go abroad and copy the first landscape, line by line, as he sees it ? the cumuli of white clouds and the maufactory chimney that cuts them brutally in twain ? the exquisite middle distance of blue moor, and hideous level of dull red-brick field for a foreground ? The mastery of art, above all of histrionic art, whether for the footlights or the world, depends on power of adequate selection and combination ; and a true artist exercises this, as he does his other faculties, unconsciously. Katharine's modest art, her mission on the planet, was to please. Heaven had bestowed on her the first essential gifts for pleasing ; education and the subtle in-

aspirations of her own genius had wrought these endowments to perfection, or the nearest possible imitation of nature. During all her chequered intimacy with Steven — Steven, whose unsophisticated instincts were really in most things a crucial test of sincerity, and who, after the first ten minutes, detected a hundred affectations in Dot—he never once was reminded by her of the social difference between them. A yeoman, whose last rough ten years of life had been spent in California or the wilderness, and a high-bred English girl, who for two seasons had had half London at her feet, they ever stood, so thorough, so delicate was her tact, as man and woman upon equal ground ; and it would have taken much deeper knowledge of women than poor Steven possessed to decide how far this equality was the result of perfect acting, and how far of genuine sympathy. When the eyes and the cheek and the voice of a beautiful woman all ring true, it may take more than one man's lifetime to ascertain the fathom-line of her heart. Probably Chastelard and Rizzio and Darnley would have said, each as he died, that the exquisite lips of the royal actress had spoken words of love for him, and for him alone.

At three years of age Katharine Fane first learnt that her golden curls, soft white arms, and beautiful face were good and profitable gifts ; easily convertible, when nestling around grown men and women's necks, into fruit and flowers and fond kisses—the riches of that age. At five she was sensible that pretty babbling words to women, and disdainful looks followed by quick relenting to men, brought as many slaves as she chose to possess to her small feet. And from that time to the present, sixteen never-idle years, the knowledge and practice of her craft had been steadily progressing.

She was not less chary of her powers at twenty-one than she had been as a coquette of five. Women less largely endowed reserve their forces ; are charming for men only, and among men draw fine distinction—such a smile for an elder brother, such for a married man, such for a prince. Katharine exercised her sway, royally, over the whole world. Women well-nigh forgave her her beauty in consideration of her frank good-nature, her generosity, her large-heartedness. She was one of those exceptional women towards whom her

own sex, without using the expression, have somewhat the feeling that men have for a good fellow. Children, from little princesses at court balls down to the ragged urchins on the Kentish seaboard, clung to her skirts and thrust up tiny hands into her warm white clasp the moment they saw her. Old men felt young when she talked to them. Married men forgot their chains beneath her smile. Poor men, plain men, ungifted men, felt their lot lightened after they had been introduced to Katharine, so cunningly could she draw forth from each, and having drawn forth, appreciate, the one poor talent that had power to raise its possessor an inch or two in his own sight. Of the great army of her slaves, men handsome, young, rich in every respect in the world's goods, I need not speak. Any very beautiful woman in the zenith of her youth can command this vassalage. In her willing sovereignty over classes whom shallower coquettes do not regard as worth conquering ; over her own sex, children, men whose homage brought no glory ; lay the special characteristic of Katharine Fane—the characteristic that must never be lost sight of if her relations with Steven's life are to be understood.

From the moment that she saw him first she knew that his heart was at her feet, and that she would never quarrel with him for his madness ! She who could choose her rich and well-born slaves by dozens would not forfeit the homage even of this Kentish farmer ! Of course he must marry Dot (poor little Dot should never be injured by rivalry of hers), and worship herself from afar, and with worship much too reverential for Lord Petres, the least jealous of men, to take umbrage at ; but he must not be let go, or not further than Zuleika, the old white cat at home, would let the mouse go who has once felt her talons unsheathed above his beating heart. Dot, to view the matter in no other light, wanted help. Dot, charming as she was to men of a different stamp, was not perhaps quite up to the simple level of Steven Lawrence. And then the ludicrous mistake which brought him here certainly required some tact and kindness to set it right !

All this Katharine thinks as she sits, her cheek resting on her hand, her face turned away from Steven, while Dot runs on from one bit of county gossip to another, and engages his answers, not

his eyes. And then she remembers how, before he came, she had told herself that his was no light fancy for her cousin, but real love : the unknown mystery of all operas' and novels ! She feels the clasp of his strong arms—hears his broken words—trembles under his kiss—and the blood shows under her shell-clear skin, and her head droops a little—and Steven's conquest is complete.

At about half-past eleven a carriage stopped, and a double knock came at the house-door. Dot rose to her feet ; she had had to suppress several vehement inclinations to yawn during the last half-hour or so, and going quickly up to one of the windows, pulled back the curtains, and peeped out.

"Here's Bella at last ! How in the world can she have set out an Atcherley dinner till this unearthly hour ?—and—and—yes, it is—Clarendon Whyte with her. How very strange !" And she ran back, and, perching herself before the glass, examined herself in it, just as she had done before Steven's arrival, only with increase of eagerness.

"Bella always *does* do such extraordinary things ! Clarendon Whyte is a great friend of General Dering's, Mr. Lawrence. I am sure you will get on together. He has been an immense sportsman—lions and tigers, and all sorts of big game in India. You will have *so* much in common, won't you ?"

"I wonder whether Mr. Lawrence and Bella will remember each other," said Katharine, with her happy knack of turning aside any excessively silly observation of Dot's. "Let me see !—ten years. Bella must have married just about the time when you left England. Ah, you will find her more changed than any of us. I won't say your name for a moment when they come, and we will see if Bella recognizes you."

Steven rose to his feet as the drawing-room door opened : and a large handsome woman, with diamonds in her dark hair, and a look of Katharine in her eyes, walked up and offered him her hand.

"Mr. Lawrence I am sure," after a shake intended, thought Steven, to make him wish himself in the backwoods again, so great was the distance at which it seemed to place him. "I should have known you anywhere, Mr. Lawrence, from your likeness to your—

relations." Mrs. Dering was going to say "family," but remembered, just in time, that it was a word inapplicable to persons in Steven Lawrence's class of life. "Come up to the fire, Mr. Whyte, we want a great deal of warmth and sociability, after all we have been going through this evening, don't we? I hope you have tea ready for us, Kate dear?"

And throwing down her ermined cloak, Mrs. Dering turned her handsome bare shoulders carelessly upon Steven, then drawing her sister to her side, touched her cheek with her lips.

"Fancy, Kate," she said, when Katharine had shaken hands with Mr. Whyte, "Lord Petres was there, after all. He ate nothing after looking at the first remove. Was wonderfully agreeable—impossible for the Atcherleys to be offended—but never put a morsel to his lips. I asked him the reason after dinner. 'Well,' he said, 'the Atcherleys are old friends of my father's, and once a year, regularly, I dine with them—besides, I hoped Katharine would be here—but I am not in a state of health to take liberties with myself. People who would shock your whole system with half-cooked lamb, at the outset of a dinner, are capable of anything. I helped myself once to a dozen or so of green peas with fear and trembling, and even they had pepper—*pepper*—the common, gross, black pepper of our national kitchen among them. If I had been a strong man, I might have felt myself called upon to respect Mrs. Atcherley's feelings, and go regularly through the poison of every course. An invalid's first duty is to himself.' Then he left the house."

Katharine laughed. "How well I can imagine his tone! It will take him a fortnight to recover from that lamb. Did you settle anything about to-morrow?"

"Lord Petres has taken a box for us at Covent Garden. I asked him to dine here and go with us, but he declined—afraid, I suppose, of more lamb and pepper, so he is to join us there, if his health is well enough; and Mr. Whyte has promised to be our escort."

While the sisters talked, Mr. Whyte was murmuring in a half-tone into Dot's ear, and Steven, unnoticed by anybody, stood still behind Mrs. Dering's shoulder. Katharine turned and raised her eyes to his. "Are you fond of music, Mr. Lawrence? $\frac{1}{2}$ If you are,

I hope we shall see you in our box at the opera to-morrow evening. Patti sings in the 'Figlia.' You will not regret the trouble of going, I think."

It was not in Steven's nature to be shy or awkward, however studiously a pair of handsome shoulders might be turned upon him. It takes a larger amount of civilization than he possessed to make a man over-sensible of his own deficiencies, or over-anxious about the opinions of others. "I shall come with pleasure, Miss Fane. I am not sure whether I like music or not, but I should like, for the first time in my life, to see a London opera-house. It is very good of you to ask me."

The slightest sidelong glance of Katharine's eyes bade Mrs. Dering invite him to dinner ; but Mrs. Dering did not or would not interpret the expression aright. "You will feel strange in your own country, Mr. Lawrence," she said, with glacial emphasis ; "I cannot imagine any place more intensely solitary than London to a person without friends or occupation there."

"But Mr. Lawrence, if he meant to stay in town, would not be without occupation !" cried Katharine, bravely. "Dot and I would find plenty of occupation for him, you may be sure, Bella. You don't know Lord Petres, Mr. Lawrence ? Well, he will call on you to-morrow, and you'll find him a capital guide about, if you don't know town well. The Charing Cross Hotel, is it not ? Ah ! here comes tea, and we shall begin to be a little bit sociable. Mr. Lawrence—Mr. Whyte—" introducing the two men, who each inclined his head by about a third of an inch. "Bella, as you are cold, come into my place by the fire, while I make tea." And crossing over the hearthrug, she seated herself at Steven's side, and bade him wheel a little table before her and help her in pouring out the tea.

From the day, nearly two years ago, when Katharine first promised, under her sister's tutelage, to marry Lord Petres, her word, her slightest whim, had been law in Hertford Street ; for Mrs. Dering, as anxious as any woman could be to possess a peer for her brother-in-law, had in her inmost heart gravest suspicions of Katharine's fidelity, and judging of her as she judged her babies, hoped to get the nauseous dose quietly swallowed by well plying her with every

imaginable sweet and toy beforehand. "Katharine has too much excellent feeling ever to allow any man's hopes to lead him too far," she was accustomed to say when intimate friends blamed her for countenancing any new flirtation of Katharine's. "There is a great difference between them in age, and Lord Petres generously desires that Kate should look upon herself as free throughout the engagement. Whatever my sister does or wishes, I countenance." So now, in rebellion to the staunchest principles of her social creed, Mrs. Dering, before five minutes had passed, found herself, willing or unwilling, forced at least to be outwardly civil to Steven Lawrence—Steven Lawrence, whom in her young days she had looked upon as very slightly removed from the ploughmen who came in blue kerchiefs and white smocks to Clithero Church on Sunday. That Dot, the poor first cousin, might have to marry this man she was prepared to accept as a necessity. A first cousin after marriage is but a distant relation, and it would unquestionably be better to see Dot decently planted on a Kentish farm than have her running about, a middle-aged girl, looking upon her own and Katharine's houses as her home in London. Only, why make of the man, his intentions undeclared, an intimate friend? Why advertise the possible misalliance by showing him to all London at Dot's side?

With a sigh Mrs. Dering looked at the growing animation of Katharine's face, and suffered herself to listen with as good a grace as she could command to their conversation. The fancy would last a week if Kate was unopposed, she consoled herself by thinking; a fortnight if she was contradicted! Kate's fidelity to her last favourite—a poet-tailor out of Shropshire—outlived six days. A yeoman, even with Steven Lawrence's handsome face, could not surely amuse her longer. As long as no one but Clarendon Whyte was by to see, it did not matter much, after all, and perhaps, for Dot's sake, it was wise to make the poor young man feel as little frightened in his position as possible.

The poor young man, far from being frightened, waited on Katharine at her tea-making with a quiet, thorough self-possession that Mr. Whyte, through half-closed eyes, saw and disapproved of exceedingly. "Miss Fane has another slave," he remarked to Dot, for

they were talking on the other side of the fire in a tone too low for the rest to overhear. "Whatever my opinion may be of your cousin's taste this time, I am glad, at least, to find that Mr. Lawrence's attentions are reserved for her, not for you, Miss Fane, as you cruelly led me to think would be the case."

Mr. Clarendon Whyte was a well-looking young gentleman, with close shaven cheeks, an ambrosial black moustache, a real or affected incapacity for pronouncing the letter "r," and a profound general distaste for smiling or being amused in any way. A young gentleman with sympathies evidently attuned to the magniloquent in common life, and who, had he been writing of himself, would probably have been painted as a beautiful wicked seductive member of the governing classes; who, when his fancy was set upon a woman, "meant it," and before the sirocco-blast of whose passions all the conventional virtues or barriers of society were wont to wither like a parched scroll; an *homme incompris*, going the pace bravely along the down-hill road, and with secrets darkly involving many women of many lands buried within his breast; a mysterious being, prone to setting his teeth firm and giving hard laughs, and within whose eyes would burn a cruel light, such as may have burnt within the eyes of the pirate kings of old, when resolving to carry off another man's wife, or commit any other deed of high and knightly enterprise.

This, I repeat, had Mr. Clarendon Whyte been capable of describing himself on paper, was about the measure of hero he would have portrayed, and this was the tone in which he ordinarily spoke of himself to women. Among men he gave it to be understood that he was one of "The Five," and as no one knew in the least what "The Five" meant, the assertion was allowed to pass current. He had been, or said he had been, in India some years back, and would speak vaguely when smoking the midnight pipe—chiefly, I think, when no old Indians were by—of the tigers he had held by the throat, and the wild boars with whom he had held single combat in the deadly jungles of Bengal. But the society of men was not much sought by Clarendon Whyte generally. The antagonism which at the first moment of their meeting sprang up between him and

Steven, was an example of the sort of instinctive distaste that generally existed between Mr. Clarendon Whyte and his fellow-men.

Men, as a rule, are grossly callous to the charms of *hommes incompris*, grossly apt to call them by the commonplace name of impostors. Who was Clarendon Whyte? If he had been a tiger slayer in the jungle, why didn't he hunt a bit in England, instead of dividing his time in lavender gloves between Piccadilly and the Brighton Cliff? If he had drank so hard and played so high formerly, why was he so moderate now? Where were his great relations? where was his extravagance? where were his vices? So spoke the jealous voice of man; but with a good many weak women, Dora Fane among them, this carpet-knight was a very great hero indeed. Dora was artificial to such an extent, that none but artificial characters had the power to affect her. The simple manhood of a man like Steven made no mark on her perceptions. Fine dress, and big words, and martial music, and the glare of the footlights, were all required before Dot could see anything worth admiring in man or woman. Steven Lawrence's clothes were ill-cut; his boots thick; his hands brown. During the whole of this first evening he never spoke once of his adventures, or of his prowess, or of himself in any way; and at his own modest valuation Dot was quite ready to take him. This beautiful being, with his faultless coat, Jouvin gloves, scented locks, and Mephistophelian whispers (only Dot never thought so long a word) she took at his. To her, Clarendon Whyte was Bayard and Mr. Rochester and Gordon Cumming all in one: a mighty hunter, a knight without fear and without reproach, and yet with unfathomable wickedness giving a gorgeous unholy glitter to his bravery and his knighthood. Never had he, by force of contrast probably, seemed so irresistible to her as on this evening of Steven's arrival. She knew very well indeed that Mr. White never meant to marry her; knew very well that she meant, her gods aiding her, to marry Steven; and still about as much emotion as she was capable of passed through her heart at the tender reproach, real or acted, which she read in Mr. Clarendon Whyte's last words.

"I—I really don't know that Mr. Lawrence's attentions are likely

to be offered to any one," she answered, with a forced laugh. "He seems more taken up with the thought of returning to Kent than anything else. You know, of course, that his land is in our parish!"

"A—market gardener, I think you said!" drawled Mr. White; "or a farrier, was it? I really forget."

"A farrier!" said Dot, biting her lip with vexation. "How malicious you are, Mr. Whyte. The Lawrences are people who have lived on their own land for generations. Yeoman-farmers, we call them. People, in their class, very much respected in the neighbourhood."

"In their class—yes—no doubt," answered Mr. Whyte, smoothing his moustache into points. "People who fulfil every duty of life, of course, and eventually have their merits as fathers and husbands recorded, on white uprights, in the village churchyard. Unfortunately, their class is not our class. But forgive me, Miss Fane! What right have I to speak of this man?—what right have I to be jealous—to have any feeling at all in your affairs?"

Dot bent down her head and pretended to trace out, with one small finger, the elaborate pattern on her Mechlin handkerchief. When she raised her face to Mr. Whyte's, tears, that were not wholly false, stood in her eyes. "I am wretched," she said, in a whisper, and with a quiver of her lip. "Why should I hide it from you? This—this—I won't say his name, but he *has* returned all the way from America for my sake. I sent him my photograph, and he's never had a night's sleep since; and as you may see for yourself, they are all trying to bring it on. Oh, Mr. Whyte, if you would but help me with your opinion! I would act in everything as you wished!"

If the expression of her face was acted, it was wonderfully pretty acting, much above Dora's general quality of art. Her lips really quivered—her tiny hands trembled as they lay clasped above the white morsel of lace on her lap. "I think I've known you long enough to look upon you as a friend," she murmured; "I think I know you well enough to be sure that you won't refuse me your advice."

Mr. Clarendon Whyte bent down over Dora Fane, and whispered

his answer in her ear : an answer which made her heart beat, and her face brighten ; but which, if put into words and divested of the adjuncts of *ess bouquet*, unfathomable eyes, and all the other powerful charms of Mr. Whyte's presence, came about to this : "That he supposed Miss Fane would be at the opera to-morrow—better time—er ; fellow looks as if he was half listening—er." But it is surprising how aptly the imaginations of women supply language, grammar, passion, eloquence ! for the men who are their peers. Fancy a simple-hearted fellow like Steven essaying to murmur imbecile monosyllables into even the most foolish woman's ear, and meeting with success ! A Bond Street tailor, Parisian perfumery, embroidered linen, and a certain prestige, are all wanted before women like Dora Fane will admit the possibility of a man's fascination. The millinery department accomplished, and the seal of their own particular clique set upon it, and the eloquence of Burke would, to their apprehension, be no more comparable with the soft nothings of a Mr. Clarendon Whyte than the Venus of Milo would be comparable in their sight with a lay-figure dressed in the last new mode at Descou's. Are such women very far removed in capacity from young children, and does not a child think the squeak of his own speaking "Topsy" the finest language in the world ? Does he not discover emotions which to us are mute—endearment, anger, reconciliation—in the sounds which he makes his puppets give forth ? Dora Fane was, I think, no exceptionally stupid or frivolous woman, but a common example of an enormously common class ; just sharp enough to supply a constant stream of passable very small talk, without an idea in life beyond the narrowest gossip of society ; no sympathy with any thing or person out of herself ; all the great interests of humanity a sealed book to her ; all nature, earth and sea and sky, a blank—save, perhaps, as a background to herself, in Watteau-like attitudes, during the autumn months. And Dora Fane seemed to reach, with geometrical nicety, the intellectual altitude, not only of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, but of the mass of young men whom she met either in town or country. "Katharine Fane is out and out the handsomest," was the opinion invariably passed upon the comparative merits of the cousins ; "a woman that any fellow bent on matrimony would like

to see at the head of his table ; but Dora Fane is the one to get on with at a ball. Light on hand—lots in her ! the kind of girl that you never feel at a loss with anywhere.” This was the opinion of all the ornamental men, the Clarendon Whytes of the world. So poor little Dot had her groove ; and it is difficult to say whether higher education, higher intelligence, would have fitted her for it more accurately.

In an hour’s time Mr. Clarendon Whyte, having drank several cups of tea and murmured more eloquence into Dora’s ear, bowed himself away ; then Steven, as soon as the other was well out of the house, rose also, and took his leave.

“Don’t forget to-morrow,” said Katharine, kindly. “Lord Petres will give you the number of our box, and don’t be late, mind—not a minute after eight, or you will miss Patti in the second scene.”

She half followed him to the door, stretching out her hand to him anew as she said this ; and Steven, forgetting the others, carried the beautiful gracious face, the warm hand-pressure, away with him into the London streets !

“You were not too civil, Bella,” said Katharine. Dot, with a yawn, having taken herself away at once to her own room. “I thought you might very well have asked him to dinner.”

“My dearest Kate ! a man in Mr. Lawrence’s position ?”

“What position, Bella ? What can be worse than the position of—Clarendon Whyte, say ? A man who lives upon the charity of such dinner-givers as want a beauty-man to fill up an unlooked-for vacancy, and whose birth—if birth signified !—for aught we know, may be a vast deal humbler than Steven Lawrence’s.”

“But until we know that it is,” answered Mrs. Dering, “and as long as Clarendon Whyte goes everywhere, we may assume him to be a gentleman. Now Steven Lawrence——”

“Go on, please.”

“Well, if you will have me speak plainly, Steven Lawrence is openly and avowedly out of our own class of life. Old Lawrence, of Ashcot, his grandfather—you may be too young to remember him, Kate, but I do accurately—dressed and spoke, and to all intents and purposes lived, like any other common labourer, and

Joshua Lawrence, as you must recollect, was only one remove better."

"Not a remove, I should think," said Katharine, quietly. "From what I have heard papa say, I should think Steven Lawrence's grandfather was a noble old man—just a simple yeoman, and so it seems to me not very far from one's idea of a gentleman! Joshua, under his wife's influence, deteriorated, because occasionally he aped being fine; and young Josh was simply shocking! with his fast town-cut coats, and tandems, and affectations of the worst forms of London slang. Steven, I should think, would be like his grandfather as he grows older. He's a very handsome man, Bella!"

"Of a certain style, Kate. He'll look very well down at Ashcot in leather gaiters, and with a pitchfork across his broad shoulders on his way to the fields——"

"When he is Dot's husband, you mean."

Mrs. Dering coloured a little. "If Dot were to marry Steven Lawrence, or any other decent man who could support her, you and I should be the last people, Katharine, to cavil at her taste. As years go on we shall be the people to suffer most if she does not marry, and she's looking terrible old already—I don't think I ever noticed it as I did this evening—bella donna in the eyes always must tell at last! In reality, I don't suppose that she is older than me, but in another year, if she goes on as she has done lately, she'll look fifty, you'll see, Kate."

"A pleasant prospect for Mr. Lawrence!" said Katharine, "though, I must say, I think we are arranging their marriage a little too prematurely. I don't know that it's a positive certainty Steven Lawrence wants to marry into our family at all."

"He must want it," said Mrs. Dering, decisively. "All men of that class want to marry above them, if they have a chance. Besides, Dot will have a thousand pounds paid down to her on her wedding-day, and a thousand pounds, after the manner in which the land has been neglected of late years, will be a very nice sum for Lawrence to put upon his farm. He would never have written to her as he did unless he meant something; and the way he held aloof from her to-night shows, from a man like that, what he feels."

"Does it, indeed?" said Katharine. "Then, men 'like that' have a very odd way of showing their feelings! May I ask, Bella—knowing that Steven Lawrence would be here—why you brought Mr. Whyte home with you? If we want Dot to marry Steven Lawrence, or any one else, it seems to me that to have Mr. Clarendon Whyte hanging about her as he does is the very last way to attain our object."

"I brought him—because he wished to come!" answered Mrs. Dering, carelessly. "The reason for which I ever have him at the house at all, Clarendon Whyte has the most ill-natured tongue in London when he chooses, and——"

"You are afraid of him!" cried Katharine, as her sister hesitated. "Now, that is a thing I never can understand in you, Bella. Why be afraid of anybody? What can Mr. Clarendon Whyte, or any other man, say to hurt you and the children? I'm afraid of no one, I am happy to say, and I never shall be."

"Wait till you have seen as much of life as I have, Kate," said Mrs. Dering. "A woman can never be above caring for the opinion of the world."

"We are speaking of Clarendon Whyte," said Katharine. "I should be proud of the ill-opinion of a world made up of Clarendon Whytes. He is a *petit-maitre*. Thank Heaven, our English language does not stoop to coin a word for such men! Could anything be more detestable than his manner to Steven Lawrence, a guest in your house, Bella? However, Lord Petres will make up for it. Lord Petres, so much I know of him, will be just as courteous to a man of Lawrence's birth as he would be to a prince. Lord Petres shall call on him to-morrow!"

"My dear Katharine!"

"My dear Bella, go off to your bed, please, and don't try to argue with me. I am going to write a note to Lord Petres this instant, to be sent to him the first thing to-morrow. You are not thinking, at this time in the morning, of interfering with my love-letters, are you, Bella?"

"I think it quite unnecessary to make so much of Steven Law-

rence," said Mrs. Dering ; "and if it was any one but you, Kate, I certainly should argue. We might wait, at least, till we are sure of Dora's mind before exhibiting him to every one we know as our future cousin. However, it won't last, Kate !" This was a parting shaft as Mrs. Dering prepared to leave the room.

"Take this backwoodsman to the opera, get Lord Petres to walk with him arm and arm down Piccadilly, ask him to dinner—I give you *carte blanche*, my dear—and see if you will have had enough of the man in three days or not ? 'Le Roi est mort—vive le Roi !' is never more applicable than to your favourites, Katharine. A fortnight ago, do you remember how angry you were with me for not taking the poet-tailor to drive with us in the Park ?"

"I remember," said Katharine. "We took Clarendon Whyte instead ; the tailor's block instead of the tailor himself. Good night, Bella."

Five or six minutes after she was alone, Katharine Fane stood motionless, with clasped hands and downcast face, in the place beside the hearth where Mrs. Dering had left her ; then suddenly she stooped, picked up the bunch of faded violets that Steven had thrown away, and raised them to her face. Some sweetness was in them still ; and Katharine held them a minute or more (could Steven have known it !) close to her lips ; then, one by one, picked them asunder, and threw each, with a little quick scornful gesture, into the fire.

"Steven Lawrence," she thought, half speaking his name aloud. "Lawrence of Ashcot, to have—have mistaken me for Dot and I obliged to forgive him ! Dot shall never know what a humiliating part I have had to play for her sake."

And then she crossed to a writing-table, and, without hesitating for a word, wrote the following note to her lover :

"MY DEAR LORD PETRES,—Steven Lawrence, the young farmer I told you of, arrived from America to-day. Will you call on him please to-morrow morning, and show him some little kindness, if it won't bore you too much ? He is at the Charing Cross Hotel. I'm

glad you enjoyed the Atcherleys' dinner. Thanks for the box for to-morrow.

"Your affectionate,

"KATHARINE.

"Let Steven Lawrence know the number of the box. You remember the little romance I told you of, about him and Dot?"



CHAPTER VII.

STEVEN'S RIVAL.

STEVEN walked along the London streets that night like a man walking in his sleep. The gas, and the faces the gas shone upon; the crowds streaming out from the different theatres; the flaring open-windowed supper-rooms—the whole outside midnight brilliancy of the civilization from which he had been divorced so long, were present before him; but only as the narrow ledge along which he treads in unconscious safety is present before the bodily perceptions of the sleep-walker.

All that Steven saw in the spirit was Katharine's smile; all that he felt was the parting pressure of her hand; and with his heart fixed on her, like Christian's on the shining figures at the gate, he smoked his cigar quietly along Piccadilly and the Haymarket; then took a turn or two up and down the Strand, and when he got back to the Charing Cross Hotel and to his rest, just fell asleep as placidly as he used to do in the woods with his saddle under his head for a pillow, dry leaves and moss for his bed, and heaven above for his roof!

Not until the next morning came: not until he had dressed and gone down into the great bare coffee-room, where two or three lonely men like himself stood dismally looking out, as far apart from each other as possible, through the windows: did the intoxication of Miss Fane's presence begin to pass away, or Steven to ask himself, with a start, what fool's part this was that he was playing? Miss Fane

possessed a gracious smile, a beautiful hand—belonging to whom? Standing, with his arms moodily folded at the farthest window in the room, Steven occupied himself for half-an-hour or more over the solution of this pleasant problem, the bearing it was likely to have upon his own life—and so rapt in his own thoughts was he, that a waiter bearing a card upon a salver, and with a marked access of respect in tone and manner, had to address him three times before he could be made to understand that a gentleman had called to see him, and was now waiting at the coffee-room door.

“Lord Petres,” said Steven, stooping to read, but not touching the card, and with the blood rising to his face—a second before he had been wishing Lord Petres in a very different place to the Charing Cross Hotel. “Ask him in of course. Didn’t you know I was here?”

Upon which the waiter went out, with fine breeding hiding the card in his own hand on the road, so that my lord should not see the ignorant contumely with which it had been received; and a minute later ushered up my lord himself, hat in hand, along the coffee-room to the place where Steven, his back to the fire, his handsome head well in the air, stood and waited for him superbly.

Lord Petres, whose life for the last five and twenty years had been spent as much in Paris as in London, possessed, with plenty of good English heartiness, all the fluent easy graces of a Frenchman, in such matters as salutation and self-introduction; and Steven, quick as men of his class always are in recognizing the presence of a gentleman, felt half his prejudices disarmed in a moment against Katharine’s lover.

“How are you, Lawrence?” shaking his hand; “very glad indeed to see you in England. Ten years you’ve been away—ah! you’ll find a good many things changed; climate same as ever, you see. Thank you,” as Steven pushed up an arm-chair for him, “but not too near the fire. I’m in very delicate health, Lawrence, and these east winds play the mischief with me. If you will let me, I’ll take off my scarf.” Saying which he sat down, unbuttoned his great-coat, and took off an enormous woollen shawl, which was tightly wrapped round his throat and face. “I have Wentworth for my chest—but

I believe in none of them—and he tells me my left lung is touched, and I must shield myself from fog—morning fog especially ; and I've Bright for my liver, and he tells me I must walk constantly in the fresh air—morning air, especially ; so between them I'm reduced, as you see, to traversing the streets like a mummy. If you have a good constitution, Lawrence, thank Heaven for the best of gifts. You see in me a wreck—a complete wreck.”

And Lord Petres smiled—a feeble, pleasant little smile ; and taking off a pair of lined seal-skin gloves, held out his hands, fragile and white as a woman's, towards the fire.

Steven gazed down at him in a sort of wonder, and without finding a word to utter.

“I must strike you as looking ill, I am sure,” said Lord Petres, earnestly. “People who see me often, of course, are no judges, and I'm so harrassed and tossed about by the conflicting opinions of the surgeons, that to have the fresh opinion of a stranger, like yourself, would be worth anything to me. Now, do I look to you seriously diseased ? meeting me, without prejudice of any sort, would you say ‘that man's liver is gone,’ or not ? I should be excessively obliged to you, Lawrence, if you could collect your thoughts on the subject and answer me honestly.”

“Well, I'm not much used to sickness myself,” said Steven ; “and another thing, I'm so accustomed to live among men with skins tanned as brown as my own, that every one I see in cities is likely to strike me as pale-faced. Certainly, seeing you for the first time I should say——”

“Lawrence, I ask you, solemnly, not to hesitate.”

“Well, then, I should say I thought you had something the matter with you ; but of course it would be beyond me in every way to guess what your complaint was.”

“Ah !” cried Lord Petres, with resignation, “if the doctors would only confess as much. If they would accept my wretched state of health as a fact, and not attempt to theorise upon it, what I should be saved—I don't speak from a commercial point of view only—what I should be saved in pernicious drugs, fruitless deprivations, early rising ! Lawrence, you have, I know, been leading a wild kind of

life of late—the only life fit for a man to live—and until you get into a state like mine, a state of chronic dyspepsia, you'll never know what civilization is. I am a martyr to erroneous British systems, past and present. My wretched digestion I inherit from men whose powers were exhausted by our national kitchen ; my present aggravated condition has been achieved by the drugs of our national pharmacopœia. It's the fashion to say that England in a hundred years will have sunk into insignificance through the exhaustion of her coal. I'll tell you my opinion, sir ; England, in half the time, will have passed into a state of decadence through her melted butter. I speak strongly on this point, because I feel about it strongly. A nation as behind-hand as England in the first essential art of civilization, must have in her constitution the deadliest seeds of decay. You agree with me ? ”

Lord Petres was a small man with a snow-white solemn face ; ink black hair, already worn upon the forehead and temples ; a slow syllabic fashion of talking (or rather enunciating ; he never spoke save to give out thoroughly well digested opinions), and certain little marked eccentricities of dress and gait that for five and twenty years, at least, had made him a well-known character in the streets of London and Paris. A valetudinarian from humour rather than necessity, the employment of every hour of the twenty-four was appointed by him beforehand. His life was regular as a dial. Exercise, meals, digestion, study ; the society of men ; the society of women ; everything with Lord Petres had its allotted season and time of duration ; and the only thing ever known to ruffle him was when any of the unavoidable chances or changes of human life sent him, perforce, an inch or so out of his accustomed orbit.

In the first days of his engagement to Katharine Fane—an engagement, it is just to say, entirely brought about by Mrs. Dering, not by either of the principal people concerned in it : marriage had ever been the one point in social economy upon which Lord Petres' opinions were hazy, if not positively unfavourable—in the first days of his engagement, following conventional decrees rather than any natural impulse, Lord Petres really suffered the even tenor of his life to be upset. Suffered his forenoon studies to be broken in upon ;

took exercise when he should have digested ; digested, or rather did not digest, when he ought to have taken exercise. On one great occasion, the effects of which he says he will bear with him to his grave, allowed himself to be carried away to a high tea at half-past six, and to the Lyceum Theatre and Mr. Fechter afterwards. But this was the last day of Lord Petres' love-making. With the frankness that was his nature, and with great delicacy, he explained to Katharine the next afternoon, how utterly wild and impossible it was that this state of things could continue. "In accepting me," he said, "you have conferred on me the highest compliment that can be conferred on any man, but to clothe a beggar in purple would be a doubtful benefit if, at the same time, you deprived him of his daily food. Regularity, to a shattered frame like mine, is what food and drink are to the healthy. You are too unprejudiced, Miss Fane, I am sure, to hold any of those empty forms and ceremonies which the common run of persons in our position seem to look upon as necessary."

And Katharine, with suspicious readiness, having given him back his liberty, Lord Petres' life from that hour flowed back into its accustomed channels. He wrote her charming little aphoristic letters, touching slightly on love, when they were parted. When they were in London together, spent three quarters of an hour regularly, each afternoon, in her society ; and in every other respect led precisely the same life as if no Katharine Fane existed. Balls and operas, save on the rarest occasions, had never been his habitude. In his way, and as much as a man to whom gastronomy is the crowning object of his life can be said to study, Lord Petres studied : read up, that is to say, from about one in the day till three, in whatever for the time being was his pet idea—religious, social, or political—and made annotations upon his reading for the great work into which during the last twenty years his opinions had been accumulating. At four, regularly, he walked ; the length of the Boulevards des Italiens in Paris, once up and down Regent Street and the entire length of Piccadilly in London. At six, the club—for one hour. At five and twenty minutes past seven to a second—

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dinner. In the evening, save when his friends dined with him, the club again ; and in his bed by twelve.

There was thus, strictly speaking, no margin left for female society in the programme of his existence, save by infringing on the hours of exercise, or of the club, before dinner. In his youth, he said, he had amassed quite sufficient facts in connection with that branch of human life. The work fitted for a man's middle years in matters of this nature was to condense, and theorize from the experience of the past. And his engagement to the most beautiful woman in London had, as I have said, been insufficient to swerve him for longer than a week from this opinion.

Among men his popularity was universal. In his own set, and outside of it, among Englishmen and Frenchmen, among Protestant bishops, and Papist priests, no man was ever heard to speak a bad word of little Lord Petres. A certain sturdy independence formed, perhaps, the basis of this popularity. A man, governed by the conventionalities, must perforce, and from the very essence of his creed, sacrifice his friends sometimes. Nothing but death could, by possibility, destroy one of Lord Petres' friendships. Let a man he had once called his friend have exhausted every conceivable folly, have spent the last shilling of his fortune, Lord Petres, until the police or the bailiffs had him, would just as soon walk arm in arm with the poor fellow down St. James's Street as though he were the honestest or the wealthiest man of his acquaintance. He was no more a respecter of reputations than of persons. When he liked a man—it would be more accurate to say, when a man suited him as a companion—lack of character, of fortune, or of birth, was to Lord Petres a matter of the most profound and thorough indifference. There was no affectation, no assumption, of any generous feeling whatsoever in this. The representative of one of the oldest and wealthiest Catholic families in the kingdom, it really never occurred to Lord Petres, as it does to self-made men, to inquire whether his friends were well-born or not. A thorough philosopher, after his own small fashion, he was beautifully, genuinely, indifferent to all vices and to all virtues that did not directly interfere with himself. Had the best friend he possessed burst in upon him with some tale of disgrace

or ruin at dinner-time, the best friend would, I believe, have received scanty compassion at Lord Petres' hands. A man, he said of himself, whose troubled secretions scarcely permitted him to digest, under the most favourable circumstances, was not to be wantonly molested by any of the smaller accidents of life at the most important hour of the twenty-four. But let his friend wait for a fitting and decent season wherein to ask his advice, and Lord Petres would not only give it—very excellent advice too !—but be quite ready to walk arm in arm with the delinquent before every club-window in town, could such public demonstration of friendship be of service to him. And men, knowing exactly how he must be taken, respected both his foibles and himself. Thoroughness, whether in a missionary priest or in a sybarite epicurean, cannot exist without making its weight felt. Little Lord Petres was thorough to the core. You could predict, with mathematical certainty, how he would act towards you in any position in which you or he could be placed. As he had been for the last five-and-twenty years, so he would continue in valetudinarianism, friendship, love of eating, shape of hats, and general philosophy to the last. And in an age of garish haste and hurry like the present—an age when the majority of human institutions seem to have about as much chance of abiding as the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope—the contemplation of a character like this carries with it a charm to which men, amidst the turmoil and fever of their own lives, can scarcely fail of being sensible.

Lord Petres' white face, his placid little smile, his philosophic little mind (less agitated ordinarily about passing political events than about the probable state of the world in the year 2000), the very shape of the hat you know so well, seemed always to bring to you a sense of repose and stability whenever you came across him. Some one said once that Lord Petres and Nôtre Dame were the only things in Paris that M. Hausmann had not been able to metamorphose. Progressive and republican, theoretically, to the most Utopian degree, he was, in his own person, the very incarnation of Conservatism. With views that rivalled the broadest German school in theology, he confessed and went to mass regularly every Easter. With theories in politics outstripping Bright and Beales, he attended scrupulously in the House

whenever the Conservative party, to which he traditionally belonged, required his vote. "Few things that a man does," he would say, "have the smallest effect, one way or the other, on the world's progress, but the most insignificant person can help or retard progress by his thoughts." And so, securing peace to himself by outward allegiance to the beliefs in which he had been reared, Lord Petres had worked on and on, during half his lifetime, at his great book on reform : a book which, when published—fifty years after his death, his will directs—will, I suspect, find the world yet unripe for the changes, social, religious, and political, which it advocates.

"You go with me, Lawrence, I hope ? There can scarcely be a worse sign for a nation than this, that in the nineteenth century it has not conquered the rudiments of the first great art of civilization. In our day we have had our use, as the mammoth and the mastodon had once, but we have not in us the germs of further progress. By help of our coal, and with brute force or dogged obstinacy, we have beaten iron into shape, and woven cotton into cloth, for the use of other nations ; but there we stop. We can sustain life, but we cannot render it endurable. We furnish the knife to slay the bullock, the cloth for the table, and then we serve up the beast, charred and gory, at our national feasts. You agree with me ?"

"I believe I agree with the English people generally," said Steven, not without a smile. In the levity engendered by youth, ignorance, and unbounded digestion, cooking to him was the least important of subjects. "For myself, a venison steak broiled over a wood-fire, a buck's head baked in an earth oven, a partridge or quail quickly roasted, and a snatch of cassava bread, have been my diet for years, with a mug of black coffee, as long as our coffee held out, to wash it down."

A look almost of excitement came across Lord Petres' impassive face. "Lawrence," said he, earnestly, "I'm delighted to have met you ! Sit down, pray. This conversation is most interesting to me. At the present moment I am endeavouring to work out an idea—not original, nothing's original—but an idea too much neglected by writers on art generally, which is that the perfection of cookery is, in many cases, to be sought, not by striving after new combinations,

but by reverting to the instinctive, untaught science of the simple hunter in the woods. Your remark confirms all that I have been writing on the subject. You speak of a venison steak smoking hot from the embers, of small game quickly roasted, of a buck's head cooked by slow and gradual heat. Good God, sir ! do you not know that all this is the *ne plus ultra* of intuitive science ? bearing out with accuracy the axiom of the immortal Savarin, that 'On devient cuisinier mais on nait rotisseur.'

"I don't know French," said Steven, "except a few words I picked up in the Canadian backwoods once ; but I know our food used to taste deuced good to us in the forests or out prairie-hunting. Still I can't say I ever enjoyed anything more than some cold beef and pickles that I ate when I landed in Southampton yesterday. After living on wild flesh as I have done for years, I believe plain English beef and mutton will be a treat to me, ill-cooked or well-cooked."

Lord Petres looked with a sort of mild envy at the yeoman's iron-knit frame and healthy weather-tanned face. "Youth, and the perpetual spring of spirits arising from good digestion, make you speak like that, Lawrence. You have lived in pure air, eaten digestible food, and abstained from the poison of the wine-merchants so long that you can speak lightly of the worst cares and burthens of civilization. Let me solemnly warn you not to tax your digestive powers too far. Even with the finest constitution, the stomach will give way in time before the meats—I refrain from calling them dishes—of ordinary English life. Cold beef and pickles, for once and under certain conditions of the stomach, may be a dinner for a prince. But cold beef and pickles for a year——"

"Would be food as good as I require," said Steven, cheerily ; "varied sometimes by spirach and bacon, or a cut at a juicy leg of mutton, with a glass of home-brewed ale afterwards. Good cookery—your fine French fricasees and wines—would be lost upon me, I guess."

Lord Petres looked thoughtful for a minute. "May I ask you, Lawrence," he said at last, "what you are thinking of ordering for your breakfast this morning ? You must not think me impertinent—I have a special object in making the inquiry."

"Ordering for breakfast !" said Steven, opening his blue eyes.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure. I never thought about it. Whatever they give the other fellows, I suppose. I'm not at all particular."

"Then will you come and breakfast with me? If you had ordered anything I would not have asked you, for I know myself there's nothing more painful than to submit to another man's taste when you have already made up your mind, prepared your faculties, as it were, for any particular task of assimilation. I've got a French fellow whose powers I should like you to give me your opinion of; and, as I don't breakfast till eleven, we can take a stroll, if you are so minded, on our way to my lodgings."

The French fellow was an artist who, it was calculated, profited by about one-seventh of his master's yearly income; an artist who, as Lord Petres presently explained to Steven, exercised an autocratic sway not only over his table, but over every social condition of his life.

"But for Duclos, indeed, Lawrence," he said, as they were walking away from the hotel, "you would probably have now found me a much happier man than I am. Considerations connected with this rascal alone prevented me from breaking up my bachelor establishment last February. I speak to you as an old friend of the family, you understand?"

Steven walked on in silence, his steady stride bearing little Lord Petres along much as a powerful steam-tug would convoy a light schooner yacht. Considerations connected with a French cook prevented Katharine Fane at this minute from being Lady Petres, and he suffered the man's arm to rest in his, was accepting his first offer of hospitality, nay, more, felt in his heart that Lord Petres was a good fellow, and that there was sympathy between them such as, when he looked at Clarendon Whyte last night, he would have sworn could never exist between him and any fine London gentleman extant! Was Lord Petres above or below his jealousy, or what?

"If it wouldn't inconvenience you, Lawrence, would you be good enough to slacken your pace a little? Thank you. In the delicate state of my different organs, I am expressly forbidden ever to get out of breath. Yes; I speak to you as a friend of the family. I

know you have been acquainted with the Fanes for years, longer than I have myself, indeed. Now, how do you find them looking? Dora is prettier than ever, isn't she?"

"I don't believe I remember her enough to say," answered Steven promptly. "She certainly is not very good-looking now, to my mind; I don't care for these little women like dolls."

"*Voilà où nous en sommes!*" thought Lord Petres. "Katharine at her usual occupation! I believe I agree with you, Lawrence; still, as a little woman, and in a certain style, Dora Fane is to be admired. She always seems to me so well suited for an entresol. Your big women dwarf low rooms, and require a massive style of furniture, frequently out of keeping with your establishment. Now, Katharine Fane—But 'tis a shame to talk of handsome women fasting, and in an east wind. The subject should be introduced, like a glass of Tokay or Grande Chartreuse, in the first and pleasantest stage of digestive reverie."

"East wind or west, on a full stomach, or a fasting one, I could give my opinion of Miss Fane," said Steven stoutly. "She is handsomer than any woman I ever saw before, and seems to me simple and good as she is handsome."

"May the Lord help you!" thought Lord Petres, giving a look of pity at Steven's flushing cheek. "Katharine Fane starting with the rôle of simplicity on a man like this.—They are charming women all three—Dora, Katharine, and Mrs. Dering; Mrs. Dering, especially, has the finest-cut shoulders of any woman I know. You couldn't have better people to run about with, if you wish to see a little of how we all live in London. By-the-bye, I've a message for you—something about a box at one of the theatres this evening."

"Miss Fane was good enough to ask me last night," said Steven, "and I accepted; but I don't believe I can go. I don't know how men dress in cities. I've nothing belonging to me but a couple of rough suits I bought in Vera Cruz before I sailed." To a Mr. Clarendon Whyte, Steven's pride would never have allowed him to make the confession; but something about Lord Petres set him as thoroughly and unconsciously at his ease, as he had been over-night in the society of Katharine Fane.

"At the London opera it's the fashion, and a very disgusting fashion too, to go in full dress—white tie, black suit, like the young gentlemen in the haberdashers' shops. Now I don't think a coat of mine would fit you?"

"Not exactly!" said Steven, with his hearty laugh.

"And the time is short for getting anything made. However, I'll tell you what we can do: we'll walk round to my tailor in Bond Street, and, if he can do nothing for you himself, he'll tell us exactly who will. Everything can be had, of a kind, in London in half an hour, if one only knows where to go for it."

The grand Bond Street tailor, who, on the strength of Steven's own merits, would probably not have taken the trouble to make a coat for him at all, was all complacency and condescension to the friend of Lord Petres; not only taking the yeoman's measure for a morning suit and frock-coat, but faithfully promising that he should be in a position to appear at Covent Garden that night. This settled, Lord Petres took out his watch and found that there was exactly time, with two minutes to spare, for them to reach his lodging by eleven o'clock.

"A great philosopher has said," he remarked, taking Steven's arm again, "that the discovery of a new dish does far more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star; and it always seems to me that the least we can offer to men who spend their life in culinary research, is the poor return of punctuality. Since Duclos has been good enough to cook for me I've never been late yet, and have had no cause to regret my attention to his feelings. Only once did he make me wait, and that was in Paris, on the evening after the coup d'état. He kept me more than half an hour; but you see, Lawrence, a good many of his relations had been shot in the course of the day, and I suppose—well," said little Lord Petres, "I suppose, in periods of political excitement, much must be forgiven—to a Frenchman."



CHAPTER VIII.

A QUESTION FOR THE FUTURE.

LORD PETRES' "lodgings" consisted of a first-floor suite of rooms, on the sunny side of St. James's Street; rooms furnished with such luxury as Steven had never seen or imagined in his life. Velvet-piled carpets, Flemish hangings, Venetian glass, Florentine bronzes—everything most costly and most artistic of its kind, was to be found in Lord Petres' bachelor lodgings. Piled-up wood-fires—one of his eccentricities was an utter intolerance of coal—blazed on every hearth. A profusion of flowers in the double windows, frescoed medallions of fruits and garlands on the walls, Louis Seize furniture tapestried in white and gold, gave the rooms almost the lightness and grace of a Parisian apartment. In a small inner cabinet, lined with books and pictures, Lord Petres' morning-room and study, the breakfast equipage was laid on a little round table drawn close beside the fire, before which an enormous Persian cat, with a leather collar round his neck, lay outstretched and asleep.

"You are hungry, I hope, Lawrence?" said Lord Petres, when he had taken off his wraps. "This accursed fog has not poisoned your system to such an extent that, like me, you are indisposed from taking food?"

"Not in the least," said Steven. "I have been in much worse fogs for weeks together, in the fall, and never felt my hunger decrease in the slightest. When you have seen me eat, you will say that mine isn't the kind of appetite to be affected by such small accidents as east wind or fog."

And he took his place, not without a feeling of misgiving, at the little table, whose Sèvres and silver, and fragile graceful *épergnes* of flowers, all spoke more plainly, he thought, of "fine French fricasees" and refinement than of the good robust kind of meal which at this moment his keen morning appetite cried aloud to receive.

"If you care to know what we are going to eat, here is the bill of

fare," said Lord Petres, handing him a slip of rose-coloured paper that lay beside his own plate. "With an enfeebled constitution like mine, it's necessary that I should know what is coming, in order to select the one or two dishes that may happen to tempt my fancy. To a man in good health, who is in the hands of a decent cook, I always say eat straight on, heedless of the past and of the future. Surprise is better than anticipation to robust nerves and an unvitiated digestion."

"Whether I look at the list or whether I don't, 'twill be much the same to me," said Steven, vainly endeavouring to decipher a syllable of the little cramped French hand, in which the menu was written; "I'm never good at handwriting, and if I could make out a syllable of this, which I can't, I should not know what it was about. *Roti*, is French for roast, I remember, and *cuit à la grille*, for broiled. That is about as much as I know, and if you were to give me a hundred pounds I couldn't tell you how to spell either. I am a man wholly without education, Lord Petres," laying the paper down, and looking steadily, yet without a heightened colour, at his host.

"Without book education," said Lord Petres, in his pleasant little way, "and a d—— good thing for you, Lawrence! Life is the only book I ever got any knowledge worth a shilling from yet. When you get to my age and can no longer study life at first hand, it will be quite time enough for you to study it in books."

The clock on the mantelpiece, accompanied with mathematical precision by three or four clocks in the adjoining apartments, now struck eleven, and at the ninth stroke exactly, the door opened, and the first course of the breakfast was brought in. "Help yourself, Lawrence," said Lord Petres. "You must excuse me from eating. I can talk, if it affords you any amusement, but I have not the least appetite to-day." And so, during the first course and the second, through fricandeaux and salmis, fish, flesh, and fowl, disguised under every delicate form by which art could seek to tempt an appetite no longer to be tempted, did Steven eat alone! Lord Petres occasionally taking a tiny morsel on his plate, and playing with it with his knife and fork, but not swallowing an ounce of food during the whole meal. When the fruit was put upon the table, he counted

out twelve strawberries on his plate, ate them, with a quarter of a slice of French roll, and drank one glass of Madeira. The first dish that had tempted the worn-out sated epicure was, after all, the dish for which M. Duclos' art had done nothing, and nature all !

Of Steven it is not too much to say that an entirely new world had opened before him during the hour or so which Lord Petres' breakfast had occupied. Just as to eyes that had never seen the beauty and the grace of womanhood, the magic of Katharine's presence last night was as a glimpse of some hitherto-unimagined Paradise ; so to a palate that for ten years had never tasted any save the simple food of the wilderness, this perfection of gastronomic art was a new and overpowering revelation of life's possibilities. At the risk of lowering Steven in some readers' interest, I must say boldly that his temperament was essentially that of a *bon vivant* by predestination. Fresh in heart and body as a child, he was keenly, fervidly ready for every pleasant thing the world could afford him—from the smiles of beautiful lips down even to the cotelettes and the filets, the sauces and the salmis, of Monsieur Duclos. When he spoke an hour ago of cold beef and pickles contenting him, he spoke in the same kind of blind ignorance which used to lead him, before he got Katharine's photograph, into thinking every robust, fresh-coloured young woman he saw in the backwood settlements a divinity. We are too much accustomed to confuse want of experience with want of capacity. Steven, with the present ignorance of a Red Indian, had in him perceptions only needing practice to ripen into the perfection of refined taste ; perceptions more keenly delicate than those of half the ultra-civilized men you meet. His limited vocabulary and modest distrust as to the worth of his own opinions withheld him from much speech ; but in the few words he did speak—in the fine discrimination he showed respecting sauces—in the very way he tasted his wine before he drank it, Lord Petres recognized a man to whom, as education advanced, food might not be the mere gross sustenance of animal existence, but a sentiment—a science : an end, not a means, in life. And the predilection which, from the first moment of seeing him, he had experienced towards Steven Lawrence, increased proportionately.

After breakfast came coffee—a subject on which Steven knew sufficient not only to feel but to speak ; then tobacco ; finally, when the one o'clock sun had slowly pierced through the London mist and was filling the rooms with friendly warmth and brightness, Lord Petres led the way back to the subject he had pronounced too sacred for fog and east wind in the forenoon.

“We were speaking, I think, of Mrs. Dering, Lawrence, when we broke off? Let us resume the subject in order. Mrs. Dering, I was observing to you, has the finest cut shoulders of any woman in London. Did you remark them?”

“I remarked little else,” said Steven. “Mrs. Dering turned her shoulders upon me from the moment she entered the room, I think, until I left it.”

“And you admired them?”

“I don’t admire her. I don’t care for these very big women.”

“Any more than for these very small ones? I see how it is, Lawrence. With Katharine Fane in the room, you have no eyes for any other woman. Her speciality is to eclipse. Dora Fane and Mrs. Dering are both, critically speaking, as good-looking as she is ; yet neither of them has a chance beside her. Something rather in her manner than in her face, I think?”

Steven smoked on in silence at one of his host’s admirable regalias. He had not philosophy enough to enter upon a discussion of Katharine’s charms with Katharine’s lover.

“And Mr. Whyte—Mr. Clarendon Whyte—was there too, of course. Can the rose be without its attendant thorn? You get on with him, I hope, Lawrence? Any man who is to be much in Hertford Street must get on with Mr. Clarendon Whyte, just at present.”

“I don’t suppose I shall be much in Hertford Street,” said Steven. “I am going down to my farm to-morrow, and shall have plenty to keep me there. One thing is certain—I don’t get on, and never should, with Mr. Whyte. These high-falutin, contumacious kind of gentlemen,” he added, with kindling eyes, “are no company for me.”

It was the first un-English expression Steven had made use of, and Lord Petres was pleased with it to such an extent that he almost laughed. “You are right, you are quite right,” said he. “The

fellow is an impostor ; Brummagem muscularity, Cockney affectation of roué-ism—worst kind of all imposture—and you would never have anything to say to each other in a dozen years. Put him on shooting or tiger-hunting some day before an audience, and see what you make of him. I am told by persons who read such works,” he continued, “that Mr. Whyte models himself on a style of young gentlemen much in vogue at present in novels, which confirms me in my distaste for that branch of literature. Still, women tolerate him. There is no denying it, Lawrence, women do as a rule tolerate all impostors.”

“Miss Dora Fane seemed to have a good deal to say to Mr. Whyte,” answered Steven. “I don’t believe either of the other ladies said six words to him during the whole time he was there.”

“Katharine would not, certainly. Katharine has opinions above those of her sex in most things. Now Mrs. Dering—you did not see General Dering, I suppose, Lawrence ? No, I should not think you ever would. You will be admitted to the set of Mrs. Dering’s friends who never see General Dering, and a great mercy for you. Nothing so painful in a house like that—I speak from knowledge—as to be on the heavy list, and forced to assist at the heavy sacrifices which the poor old General calls dinner-parties.”

Steven was silent. There was profanity to him in the lightness with which Lord Petres canvassed the merits and demerits of Katharine’s relations.

“Mrs. Dering is a clever woman,” went on Lord Petres, watching his face. “A woman the world speaks well of, and a very excellent chaperon for the Miss Fanes. You and I may be perfectly frank in speaking of all this, Lawrence. I, as you know, am going to marry Katharine ; you, as I surmise, are in a position to be congratulated with respect to Dora, and——”

“I congratulated about Dora Fane !” cried Steven, his face a-fire. “I think not, Lord Petres. Whoever told you so was mistaken. I know nothing more unlikely than Miss Fane becoming my wife.”

“Well, then I congratulate you still more,” said Lord Petres, pleasantly. “Will you hand me over the tobacco ? Thanks. Marriage is a great mystery, Lawrence,” preparing a delicate cigarette as he spoke, “and, unless a man be specially gifted, he is wise not to attempt its solution. What can a single life do towards throwing light upon a

problem which has vexed every political economist from the time of Moses—to go back no farther—till our own?”

“All I want is to have light thrown upon my own life,” said Steven. “I know nothing of problems or political economy, but——”

“You believe enforced companionship with one human creature until you die would promote your happiness? Ah, I think I believed that once—very long ago. All men have believed it, I suppose, at some stage, more or less crude, of their experience.”

“I can’t imagine a man marrying who does not believe it,” said Steven, warmly. “I can’t understand a man engaging himself to marry any woman unless he believed that it would add to his happiness to possess her.”

Lord Petres sent down a cloud of smoke with grave thoughtfulness through his nostrils. “What is happiness, Lawrence? What for the matter of that, is possession? How much of a woman can a man call his? Does she belong most to the husband, whom she sees for three hours out of the twenty-four, or to the world, for whom she dresses, drives, dances, and of which she dreams during the remainder? Now I am not a sentimental or a jealous man myself. Nothing would content me better in marriage than to be allowed to retain the precise habits of my present life, and for my wife to retain hers; but even my very modest scheme of happiness will, I feel, be shattered by my change of condition. I don’t complain. I am going to marry. I simply accept as a fact—a fact in conformity, doubtless, with some larger law beyond my comprehension—that Duclos will leave me. I have argued; I have written, indeed, a sort of *brochure* for him, comprehending all that could be urged on both sides of the question, have twice augmented his income; but all in vain. Duclos leaves me. He has no objection, he tells me, to my future wife; not a word to say against my marriage, as a marriage. But it is a fixed principle of his life only to preside over bachelor establishments, and to this fixed principle I am to be brutally sacrificed.

“And are there no other French cooks to be had?” cried Steven. “Couldn’t some artist be found with Monsieur Duclos’ talents but without Monsieur Duclos’ prejudices?”

“Lawrence,” said Petres, with something like a shade of colour,

coming into his white face, "This is a subject which you must allow me to say I feel too strongly about to discuss at the present moment. During the period of digestion Bright has expressly forbidden me to distress myself with any painful or complicated trains of thought. I was wrong to introduce Duclos' name at all. Speak about it to Katharine, who is in robust health and able to contend with disagreeable subjects, and she will tell you the whole story of how our marriage came to be put off. Are you going to Hertford Street this afternoon?"

"I? No; I suppose not," said Steven, rising and looking through the window. "What excuse should I have for calling again so soon?"

"My dear sir, the last thing a woman ever needs excuses for is a man's attention to herself! If you wanted an excuse, which you don't, nothing would be easier than for you to leave a bouquet or bouquets for them as they are going to the opera to-night."

"I shouldn't think Miss Fane would be likely to accept flowers sent her by me," said Steven, stiffly, but with thoroughly sincere humility. "When she was a little child, and I a lad on my uncle's farm, I used to give her and Miss Dora bunches of flowers when I met them in the lanes. But amongst children there is no disparity of class, you know."

"I know that whatever Katharine Fane was at ten, you will find her at twenty-one," answered Lord Petres; "not a single vulgar or little feeling has place in Katharine's heart, more than can be said perhaps of her sister and cousin. A duke or a plain country squire is just the same to Katharine Fane, so long as he pleases her personally. Her fault, if fault you call it, is rather coquetry, Lawrence."

A knife seemed to enter, sudden and cold, into Steven's heart. Love has intuitions, like those of genius. Some sharpening of his faculties seemed to lay bare before the yeoman in one moment all Miss Fane's past and future life; and he knew that he was jealous of it all! "Coquetry!" he repeated, half aloud; "I should not have thought a fault like that would be charged to Katharine Fane!"

"Well, I do not consider it a fault," said Lord Petres. "The mission of all women, I take it, is to please, and the woman is most

womanly who pleases best. This, of course, is looking at the subject from a one-sided point of view. When you admire a hawk, you admire it for the qualities of its kind, not taking into account the sufferings of the sparrows. Katharine Fane flirts as the men of her race have been noted for fighting, neither expecting quarter, nor giving it. She knows nothing at all of love or sentiment, except in theory, but can act them both far more prettily than life; and in a handsome woman, Lawrence, nothing compels men's admiration so certainly as a notorious incapacity for love on her side. Every man thinks he will be an exception to the general rule."

Lord Petres spoke in his usual impassive voice, but with the faint little curl generally to be noticed round his lips when the subject of love was under consideration. Steven Lawrence's heart fired. "Isn't it going too far to speak of 'incapacity' Lord Petres? Can a woman be a woman, yet incapable of love? May not what you call her incapacity be, in fact, that she has never met with a man who so loved her as to compel her to give him back her love in payment?"

"I have not much opinion of that doctrine of reciprocity," said Lord Petres, shaking his head, and speaking in just the same kind of tone in which he would have discussed some doubtful combination in sauces or stuffings. "Devotion and blind faith and exalted passion are very nice things, in themselves, but when they are laid before women of the world, generally end in being trodden under foot by the person to whom they are offered."

"Then the less I have to do with women of the world, and the more I keep to my farm, the better for me!" said Steven, with spirit. "I have no desire to lay down my heart for the fairest woman that ever lived to tread upon."

"If you do so, remember that I warned you," said Lord Petres, as Steven held out his hand to him. "Remember, also, that it is a great deal better to be made miserable, temporarily, by a woman who won't marry one, than eternally by a woman who will! Really Lawrence, levity apart, I'm very glad you have no serious thoughts at all about love or marriage. Dora Fane is a pretty little woman (for an entresol) and all that, but monstrous expensive in her tastes

and about as good a companion for a man as the gilt butterfly on that clock. See every kind of life you can, and avoid as much as possible falling into the slough of British meats and wines—wines especially. A delicate palate like yours is not a gift to trifle with, and once vitiated, can never be recovered. There are not six unprofessional men in London who could have discriminated between the different vintages of Chambertin as you did. Above all, Lawrence, keep yourself free from entanglements. In your present frame of mind, a woman who didn't love you enough, or a woman who loved you too much, might just upset the whole remainder of your life for you."

"A woman who loved you too much." Do not call Steven a fool when I tell you that out of this commonplace remark of Lord Petres his heart built up a presentiment of good that made him happy during the next four hours at least! Most great and desperate passions start with childish faith in omens, with childish and insensate hopes. Just as plainly as Lord Petres had shown it to him did Steven know that he was not, and never could be, aught, save a moment's pastime, to Katharine Fane. That she was a coquette; that his love, did he offer it, would be trodden by her under foot—according to the custom of all women of the world—he never thought of questioning. And yet he hoped! if those first vague brooding dreams of passion can be called hope. He was quite humble; had no suspicion of double motive in anything Lord Petres had said to him; knew that he was a thorough unqualified simpleton, and was happy—perhaps during his whole life never was so happy again as on this day. That the excellent food, the wines, the tobacco, of Lord Petres had had some influence on his mental state, is more than likely . . . but I shrink from these humiliating analyzations. The May sun shone piercing clear; the east wind, to Steven's healthy nerves, seemed to blow with pleasant springtide freshness; and everything about the London streets looked gilded in his sight.

He walked, chance guided, when he left St. James's Street, far away east, and thought how all the noise and movement of this city life cheered a man's heart; how it called aloud to him to work, and told him what wealth, what power, was to be won by the constant

will and by the strong right arm ! Under ordinary circumstances a stranger, poor and alone, could scarcely listen to that city roar, I think, without remembering something of the human misery—the dead hopes, the living defeat—which is its daily burthen. But Steven was in a kind of rapture, and not a note from the great minor chord of pain and poverty and fruitless toil reached his ear. When he reached St. Paul's he turned, and with the afternoon sun shining on his face, walked leisurely back as far as Piccadilly, then through the Park to Kensington Gardens, where the great world had begun to assemble to listen to the band. How fair the women looked under the flowering chestnuts ; how their delicate silks glistened in the sun ; how rose and white the English faces showed in the level light ! Everything Steven looked at seemed endowed with some bright and personal significance to himself to-day. All this outward glitter of wealth and pleasure—these equipages, horses, fair women—instead of crushing him as it ought to have done with a fatal sense of his own insignificance, appeared to him rather as a sort of show or gala got up to celebrate his return to England and the happiness that he had found there. London was great, truly, and he small ; rich, and he poor. But he was to meet Katharine to-night ! Out of all this crowd could there be six other men, he wondered, as happy as himself ?

As he stood, unnoticed by every one, listening to the band, his thoughts, unbidden, travelled back over the last ten years : over his fever of gold-seeking, his wanderings with Klaus in the wilderness, the simple ambitions and defeats of his hunter's life ; and, with a sudden emotion, half shame, half pity for himself, Steven knew that he had been a savage till yesterday. A savage till yesterday ; and he was to meet Katharine Fane, by her own bidding, to night ! Sometimes, when he and Klaus were "yarning" by the camp-fire at night, they had been wont to speculate what a man's sensations would be, who, with tastes, with wants like theirs, should abruptly be told that he had come into ten thousand a-year. Steven was realizing a more intense, a more poignant alternation of fortune now ; he had risen in a day from existence to life, from the sober plain of every-day contentment to the torrid heights, the restless intoxication of passion.

Was he to profit by the exchange as men usually do profit, who in maturity barter the poverty they know for riches of whose use they are ignorant? This was a question for the future.

Towards five o'clock he crossed the Park again, and made his way to Covent Garden, where he spent a sovereign on a bunch of flowers for Miss Fane: tuberoses, lilies of the valley, white rose-buds, stephanotis; flowers that his instinct told him Katharine would have chosen had she been at his side. These he carried himself to Hertford Street, and left for her.

"For Miss Fane, sir?" asked the servant.

"For Miss Fane," said Steven, turning quickly away. And so the twenty shilling bouquet was taken upstairs at once and given over into Dora's small hands.

They were hands to hold fast everything that came, whether by mistake or of intention, into their grasp.



CHAPTER IX.

MEA CULPA.

MRS. DERING was a clever woman, Lord Petres had said—a woman the world spoke well of, and an excellent chaperon for the Miss Fanes. And testing cleverness, excellence, and the world's good opinion by a certain not too-exalted standard, Lord Petres was right.

At nineteen years of age, with only her youth and her handsome person for her dower, Arabella Fane, of her own free will, had promised to love, honour, and obey a man as thoroughly distasteful to her as any human creature with money could be, and nearly thrice her age, but who possessed a comfortable income (settled on her after his death) of three thousand a year; and from her wedding-day until now had acquitted herself in her position as the young wife of an old man with entire credit. She had four children, whom she did not neglect; she looked well after her husband's household; dressed better and spent less on her dress than most women; went regularly to church and the court balls; received a great deal of

attention, yet never occasioned any scandal ; gave subscriptions with an ungrudging spirit to such metropolitan charities as published printed reports ; and had already secured for her sister Katharine one of the best matrimonial prizes in London. When the General or the children were ill, she was a sedulous nurse ; when a relation died, she wore mourning for a week longer than the milliner told her was necessary ; when any of her dear friends forfeited their position she cut them, if three or four of her best acquaintances had decided to do the same—if not, she really felt it was no place of hers to be the judge of her weaker brethren. An excellent wife, mother, and friend, Mrs. Dering, in addition to her high moral qualifications, had the reputation of being one of the pleasantest women in town to sit next at a dinner-party. She possessed real intelligence, with a little of Katharine's charm of manner when she talked ; could take interest enough for conversational purposes in politics, theology, hunting, art, and even literature ; and had always a stock of quiet, perfectly-safe flirtation in reserve for men too stupid or too clever to be amused in any other way. Whether Mrs. Dering liked anything strongly was a question that the human being nearest to her in the world, her sister, had not yet solved. She hated two things most thoroughly—the country and poverty ; and had the good taste always to speak of both in accents of decency and respect. Next to these, I think—partly, perhaps, as belonging to the country, partly to poverty—she disliked her cousin Dora ; but invariably asked that poor little relation to spend the six best weeks of the season in her house, from which act of self-sacrifice alone you will see that Mrs. Dering was a woman of real principles.

“If Dora does not marry,” she was accustomed to say, “Dora, after my mother's death, will have a right to look upon my house as her home.” And in saying this she was sincere. She would sooner have subjected herself to any personal annoyance than that the world should have occasion to say a near relation of Mrs. Dering's was forced to work for her bread. But I don't know that I would have cared to change places with the poor relation whose fortune it was to live on Mrs. Dering's charity.

General Dering, happily alike for me and for the reader, spent the

whole of his existence at the Senior United Service Club—a sacred retreat with which the plain history of Steven Lawrence can certainly have no concern. For thirty years of his life the old General had dined at seven : an hour which, as his wife and the Miss Fanes unanimously decreed, “broke in upon everything,” and had the additional disadvantage of being fixed. So throughout the whole of the past and present season—except on occasion of those heavy sacrifices called dinner-parties, of which Lord Petres had told Steven—General Dering, greatly to everybody’s relief, had adopted the practice of dining at his club, leaving Mrs. Dering and the girls free to celebrate high tea at any hour from five to nine that happened to suit their arrangements for the evening.

“High tea is so economical, my love,” Mrs. Dering had said, when first making covert advances to her husband on the subject : “so economical, and gives such infinitely less trouble in the house. I almost think we could do without Batters if we took to it for good ; and then, you see, you will never be put out of your way. Of course, for the girls’ sake, I must go to these operas and balls ; but that is no reason why you should be made to suffer ; and you know you are ill for a week, dear, always, if you dine half an hour earlier or later than usual.”

Now, the reasons which made a movable high tea more economical than a fixed dinner are as inscrutable to me as the reasons for which the meal was called tea at all. There was never the most shadowy pretence at tea to be seen on the table—what fashionable ladies could keep up the strength their hard life demands on such mild fluid ? and mayonnaises, cold game and poultry, and raised pies, are not, in the country at least, cheaper than hot dishes. That high tea, with three young and charming women, open windows, no servants, and no master of the house, was a much pleasanter meal than a hot dinner in a hot room, with a hot butler, and a hot old General eating audibly, was incontestable ; and Mr. Clarendon Whyte, and all other bachelor frequenters of the house, were loud in praise of the change, and strenuous in advocating it among disaffected young wives and revolutionary daughters elsewhere.

For a good many years past the first care of poor Mr. Clarendon

Whyte's soul had been to dine gratuitously. He might prefer hot food to cold : this was a matter of detail. To make the principal meal of the day free of cost, must ever be a primary consideration in life to a gentleman who, on, say, two hundred pounds a year, assumes the position of ten times that sum. And for every dinner to which he could, by possibility, have been invited under the old régime, Mr. Clarendon Whyte was invited now to at least five high teas. Always well dressed, always good-looking, always ready to be taken about to operas, balls, or concerts afterwards, Mr. Whyte, as Katharine used to say, was a very convenient honorary laquais de place of the establishment ; and as he was thoroughly impartial in his attentions publicly to Mrs. Dering and the two Miss Fanes, the world had not as yet found much, matrimonial or scandalous, to say respecting the intimacy.

On this evening, when Steven was invited to meet them at Covent Garden, one of the accustomed high teas was to take place at half-past six ; and at some minutes before six o'clock, Katharine Fane, already dressed as she was to be at the opera, came into the drawing-room, where Lord Petres was waiting for her. The effect of evening dress by daylight is, in most cases, a discordant one. Your sense of fitness is disturbed by some bright colour, some garish jewellery out of keeping with the sober eyes of day, that they were never meant to meet. But Katharine Fane was a woman with whom dress was always subsidiary. At a breakfast-table or in a ball-room, in a riding-habit or a court train, it was invariably Katharine herself, not the colour or shape of what she wore, that held your eyes captive. A flowing soft-hued silk, white lace drapery veiling the noble lines of arm and throat, a piece of stephanotis in her brown hair, this was her toilette now. No earrings, no bracelet, no trinket of any kind about her ; no tinge of colour on the face that nature had left so perfect in its delicate but healthy pallor.

She walked up with a smile of welcome to her lover's side, and he took her hand with the tips of his fingers, and carried it to his lips. Lord Petres had thoroughly decorous and French ideas on the subject of unmarried girls. "You are looking charming Katharine.

The way that you retain your looks in weather like this is really admirable."

"And you—how are you getting on to-day? I *am* so sorry about the east wind," said Katharine, with the prettiest air of concern imaginable. "Once this afternoon I hoped it had gone round, just an inch or two, to the south ; but I'm afraid it has got back to the old quarter again this evening."

And she drew back a window-curtain with the hand that ~~was~~ disengaged, and looked out at the blue sky and cold sunshine which suited her own hardy temperament so well with a shake of the head full of mournful interest.

"The wind never leaves the east till August in this country," said Lord Petres, creeping with a shiver into an arm-chair close to the fire, upon which, in nice accordance with his tastes, two or three huge pieces of wood were blazing cheerily. "It shows very good feeling in you, Katharine, always to remember my sufferings—most persons, blessed with a constitution like yours, insult me by saying that the continuance of dry weather is healthy, or good for the wheat, or the poor ; as if any statistics of that nature could interest a man with a digestion like mine—but I think, really, you have had enough of them for this season. I shall go to Paris to-morrow morning."

"Paris ! not to stay there ?" She came quickly to his side, rested one white hand upon the arm of his chair, then turned away her face, and gave a little sigh. "Paris has more charms for you always than London, Lord Petres."

"Paris," said Lord Petres, solemnly, "has, with an equal amount of east wind, a warmer sun and less dust. On the south side of the Palais Royal, or under the chestnuts at the Luxembourg, an invalid at certain hours of the day may occasionally flatter himself into the belief that May is a summer month. Besides, Katharine—you know I am always frank with you—Duclos is Paris-sick. If I let him have three or four weeks of Mabile and the theatres now, he will, perhaps, be contented with England later on in the season. You understand ?"

"I understand that Duclos is a tyrant," said Miss Fane ; "for as to Paris being warmer than London, I don't believe a word of it.

If M. Duclos wants a little Parisian dissipation, to Paris his master goes, no matter whether Katharine Fane is to be left alone in London or not."

"I shall not be gone a month, Kate, and you will have Dora's love affairs with the backwoodsman to settle in my absence."

Katharine coloured to her eyes; then bit her lip with vexation at the knowledge that she had done so. "You did not think me a great trouble for asking you to call on Steven Lawrence, did you? He has not a friend in London, and Mr. Whyte, and Bella, too, if the truth must be told, were so disagreeable to him the night he arrived, and—and I wrote my note to you on the impulse of the moment."

"Which, like all your impulses, was a right one, Katharine. Lawrence is a capital fellow—rough in the setting and ignorant, the worse for him! but very good company in his way, and as fine a natural taste in wines as I ever met with. I brought the fellow home to breakfast; did he tell you? and we got on excellently."

"You called on Steven Lawrence at once? You asked him to breakfast!" Miss Fane sat herself down on a low ottoman at her lover's side, and turned her face, beautifully radiant, up to his. "Lord Petres, how like you that was! But I knew you wouldn't mind, I knew you would be good-natured, if I asked you, to a person in Mr. Lawrence's position."

"His position is a dangerous one, Kate. I've a great mind, only that it would rob you of an amusement, to take Steven Lawrence over to Paris with me. Paris, if he went to-morrow morning, might be his salvation. In another week it would be too late."

"Salvation! a dangerous position!" cried Katharine, opening those serene brown eyes of hers wide. "Good gracious! what is all this about? What particular peril does Mr. Lawrence run in London? He's old enough and big enough to look after himself, I'm sure."

"Did he bring you a bouquet this afternoon, Miss Fane?"

"He—he, or some one, left a bouquet, I believe, but Dot has it. It was for Miss Fane. Of course that meant Dora, not me."

"And where did you get the orange blossom you have in your

hair? 'Tis beautifully dressed, Kate—would do credit to the best coiffeur in Europe. That natural crisp wave is what all the women in Paris have burnt their hair off their heads in trying to imitate."

"Orange blossom! I do wish you would try to remember the names of plants. How often I have tried to make you learn them! As if I should think of wearing orange blossom! I got my poor little bit of stephanotis out of Dot's bouquet. It was made up entirely of white flowers, and Dot likes everything with so much colour; so I took this bit of stephanotis from the centre, and cut her one of Bella's pink camellias to put there instead."

"Ah! And what (the stephanotis being disposed of) is going to be done between you and Dora with Steven himself? You know me too well, Kate, to think that I would interfere with anything that affords you innocent amusement; but—regarding me altogether as an indifferent spectator—I wish you would tell me what is going to be done with Steven? I never read fiction or attend theatres, as you know——"

"Except the Lyceum once," interrupted Katharine.

"But if I can just be told the beginning and witness the end, these little love dramas of real life divert me amazingly."

"I really don't know what you mean by 'love dramas' and 'becoming' of Steven," said Miss Fane, with a great air of unconcern. "I told you—did I not? about some letters there had been between him and Dot. The most likely thing for him to 'become' is her husband, I should suppose."

"Afterwards?"

"Why, be happy for ever, like the people in stories," cried Katharine, "of course. I consider that Dora would be a prize for any man. It will be a great piece of good fortune for your favourite, Lord Petres, if he marries her."

"My favourite or any other man who marries Dora Fane will require a good fortune," said Lord Petres, drily. "Kate, removed as you are so much above the prejudices of your sex in general, why do you retain this unholy hobby of seeking to promote the general unhappiness of the world through match-making? What good, what pleasure, will there be to yourself in forcing this unhappy young man into marrying your cousin Dora."

"I force him, Lord Petres? What in the world do you mean? What influence can I have over Steven Lawrence or his decisions?"

"Every influence," was Lord Petres' placid answer. "Every influence, Katharine. How is it possible it should be otherwise? A man of a sanguine temperament like this backwoodsman, is thrown, after living among wild beasts and savages for years, into the society of Katharine Fane, puts his heart—to speak, Kate, in the sentimental language that you like—at her feet, and then, Katharine Fane having been sufficiently amused by his torture, is to be kept quiet by a marriage with Miss Dora. Against the first part of the transaction I have nothing whatever to urge; but against the marriage, if only on behalf of suffering humanity generally, I protest. As soon as I saw what a good fellow Lawrence was, I determined to speak to you about it. Don't marry him to Dora!"

"If Mr. Lawrence wishes to marry my cousin, I shall certainly not bias her, either for or against him," said Katharine, wisely passing over the first portion of Lord Petres' remarks. "You talk of my hobby for matchmaking. If all your hobbies were carried into effect there would neither be love nor marriage, nor anything else that is good and unselfish in the world, you must remember!"

Miss Fane brought out the shot with spirit, and her eyes kindled.

"Whatever you or I think, will have small effect on the increase or decrease of marriage generally," said Lord Petres, with perfect equanimity. "It is a matter governed more by the price of bread, they say, than by any considerations of a sentimental or moral character; so please don't be angry with me, Kate! Marry Steven Lawrence to Dora or to any one else, if it diverts you, but don't quarrel with me! I'm too weak to bear the effects of anger from you to-day." And Lord Petres lifted the beautiful white hand tenderly, then held it, as well as its superior size would allow, within his own.

Katharine's whole manner changed in a moment, her eyes softened, a little well-pleased smile came round the corner of her lips. Notwithstanding all his small selfishness, all his sybarite effeminate eccentricity, Miss Fane, in a certain way (and putting love wholly out of the question), was very much more attached to Lord Petres

than the world in general, or perhaps than she herself, really believed. She belonged to that rare class of women who are able, frankly and without vanity, to make themselves the friends and companions of men even while the accidents of youth and beauty make men their slaves. All Lord Petres' quaint philosophies and systems amused her, all the sterling worth of his steadfast little character appealed to her just as heartily as if she had been a man instead of a girl of one and twenty. And then, it must be remembered, he never made love to her; never was jealous, never paid attention to any other woman—never, when they happened to be seen together publicly, was anything but charming in his devotion to herself! What could she feel but gratitude to so perfectly generous a lover? What resolve could she have but to repay his absolute trust in her, however she might err in the letter, by the most absolute and loyal rectitude in the spirit?

"I have something very particular that I want to tell you about, Lord Petres. You won't be angry with me—promise me you won't?—when you hear how it happened; something about this Steven Lawrence, and no fault of mine, as you will see."

Whatever mischief poor Katharine's insatiate thirst for conquest had led her into since her engagement, she had always repeated the whole sum of her offending, without concealment or extenuation, to Lord Petres. There could be no very black guilt on her part, she would say to her conscience, so long as she was not ashamed to lay bare the state of her soul before him, her legitimate confessor; and as her conquests, and her repentances, on an average, could be reckoned at about two a week, the sound of *mea culpa* had already a somewhat familiar ring in Lord Petres' ears.

"I have wanted very much to tell you—please don't go to sleep! I shall be so unhappy if you don't forgive me—but Dot, as usual, made one of her ridiculous mistakes—sent my photograph to this young man—Lord Petres, if you look like that again I shall be silent—instead of her own. Now, could I help it?"

"You could not, Katharine."

"Didn't I do everything I could for them both? stopped away from the Atcherleys, where I was to have met you, to chaperon them

—everything? Well, when he came—when this Mr. Lawrence came, Dot happened to have left the room, and so I . . . Lord Petres, I don't think it kind of you to laugh . . . I had to receive him alone. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"And when he was shown in, of course, I went forward to meet him, and—how I do hate having to tell such ridiculous stories—he mistook me for Dot!"

Lord Petres was silent.

"Do you understand me, or are you asleep?" said Katharine petulantly; "or do you want me to repeat the charming little anecdote again? I had to receive Mr. Lawrence, your favourite, alone, and—for I choose to tell you everything, sir, whether it is to my credit or not—and he," dividing each word syllabically, "mis-took me for Dot."

"Mis-took you for Dot," repeated Lord Petres. "Then all I've got to say is, it must have been very disappointing for him when he found out his mistake."

Miss Fane drew away her hand, and moved from Lord Petres' side. After making a confession which costs one's pride dear, there are few circumstances more humiliating than to find our confessor very much less moved by our guilt than we ourselves.

"I wonder whether you care for anything, Lord Petres! I wonder whether anything I did, or left undone, *could*, for one instant cause you an emotion of any kind?"

"Certainly, hearing that you had been mistaken for your cousin Dora, would not," answered Lord Petres. "Why will you insist upon wanting impossibilities, Katharine? Violent emotions—supposing me capable of them—would kill me. Every physician I ever consulted has ordered me to keep my feelings at a nice point of equilibrium, and fortunately, on the present occasion, they are divided with such geometrical accuracy that they precisely counterbalance each other. I'm sorry for Lawrence, because, as I told you just now, I like the fellow, and I foresee grief in store for him, and I am glad for Miss Fane, because I foresee a new amusement in store for her——"

"Amusement—for me? I amused by Mr. Lawrence, after what I have to'd you?"

"Amused by torturing him first, and marrying him to Dot afterwards? certainly, Katharine. Don't be angry again. You can't help it, I know. The whole thing is a matter of course. Are spiders responsible for the imbecilities of the flies who choose to get entangled in their beautiful glistening webs? Men have the lower animals on which to gratify the instincts of their nature for destruction. Women, in obedience to the stupid customs of civilization, are forced to seek their quarry among their own species. If you had foxes to run down or pheasants to shoot, Katharine, you would not be as cruel to your kind as you are, depend upon it."

"Cruel!" exclaimed Katharine, almost with tears in her eyes. "Well, I did not think such an accusation as that would ever have been brought against me. The feeling I have for Steven Lawrence is one of pure, simple kindness, and for Dot's sake—yes, and for his own too—I mean, whatever you may think, Lord Petres, to do the poor fellow any good turn that lies in my power."

"Oh, that is quite a different affair!" said Lord Petres, gravely; "I was unjust to you, Kate. You say you mean to do the poor fellow any good turn that lies in your power. I will tell you how to carry that intention out at once. Stay away from the theatre to-night, say 'Not at home' when he calls to-morrow, and for ever afterwards. The cure will be certain. Lawrence is not a man to force himself where he has once met with a rebuff."

Katharine Fane hesitated. "I should hate even to *seem* to be unkind to a man placed as he is, Lord Petres. I can't help liking poor Steven Lawrence, in spite—in spite of his presumption; and his farm, as you know, is not two miles from the Dene. Would anything be more disagreeable than to meet him constantly in the country, as I must do, after behaving coldly to him now? Besides," she added, lightly, "all this you say about Mr. Lawrence's danger is really an affair of your own imagination. Do stout healthy men in real life break their hearts because they have been sentimental for three weeks over a wrong photograph? I wished to tell you the truth, of course, and now I shall never think of it at all again, except,

I mean, as far as Dot is concerned, nor, I should say, would Steven Lawrence."

"Amuse yourself well, Katharine," said Lord Petres, taking out his watch and rising; "I am sorry to spend such a short time with you, but I have to see Bright before dinner about some new poison he wants me to take, and it is five and twenty minutes past six already. I shall write to you by the late post on Monday next, and if you have anything to say meanwhile write to me—the usual address. Now what am I especially to remember to do for you in Paris?"

"You are especially to remember to return soon," said Katharine; 'also, if you can, to write to me oftener than once a fortnight while you are away."

"And what about dress? You know I never forget anything you commission me to do."

"Well, if you are sure it is not too much trouble, I should like you to tell me about bonnets. Do the very best-dressed people wear the Reine Margot or the Dubarry shape? You know the difference between the two?"

"Perfectly." Lord Petres understood women's dress like a Frenchman. "I will go in the Bois the day but one after my arrival, with no other object than to elucidate the point. Anything else?"

"I should like to know if the skirts are worn as long as ever, and also if they are *invariably* gored in thin materials. In silk and stuff there can be no question, of course, but—in spite of Descou—Bella and I feel the gravest doubts as regards ball-dresses."

"I will ask the best authorities in Europe, Katharine, and let you know. Are ball dresses or other thin materials *invariably* gored! Anything more?"

"Think of me a little, Lord Petres!"

"Quite a needless injunction, Miss Fane! Paris, with all the good that can be said for it, is the one city on earth where a beautiful Englishwoman runs least risk of being forgotten. I shall see no face like Katharine Fane's till I return."

This was how they parted ! as they had parted any time during the last twelve months of their engagement. A well-acted reproach or two, a commission about the shape of bonnets and skirts from Katharine, a gracefully-turned compliment, a kiss on the white hand from Lord Petres. Was life to be taken up for ever in acting pretty little pictures of manners like these ? thought Miss Fane, when she was alone ; partings in which the lady droops her head and the gentleman kisses the tips of her fingers just as the figures do in a marionette comedy ; mock confessions made with a picturesque expression of repentance, to set a mock conscience at rest ; later on, a prettier picture than all, with a soft-eyed marble-hearted bride in white silk and Honiton lace, a high-bred bored little bridegroom, for the principal figures, a train of attendant bridesmaids in the background, a Protestant dean, perhaps, and a Catholic bishop to bestow their several blessings on the happy pair ; and then—then a wider scope of characters, with richer dresses and jewels to act them in, and Lord Petres, courteous valetudinarian, indifferent ; an excellent bachelor acquaintance for two hours out of the twenty-four, and as far from her, Katharine Fane, as the frigid pole from the broad equator, to be her fellow-actor for the remainder of her days ? Was it possible that the fishermen's wives along the coast at home, with their few roods of sandy garden, their cottage full of sunburnt urchins, their simple human round of wifely cares, had a wholesomer, heartier hold on life than hers could ever be ? Why, even Dot——

And then the door opened, and Dot, shining like a stage fairy, in bright pink silk, and with gold dust in her short hair, and Steven's flowers in her hand, walked in.

"I waited patiently till Lord Petres had departed, Kate. Bella met him as he was going out, and he tells her he is off to Paris to-morrow morning—not very lover-like, I think. Why, Katharine, there are tears in your eyes ! Do you actually mean to say you care about bidding good-bye to Lord Petres for three weeks ? or was it Mrs. Siddons or Rachel, who always used to shed real tears at the pathetic parts when she was acting ?"

CHAPTER X.

TWO HOURS IN PARADISE.

THE first scene of the *Figlia* was nearly over when Steven reached Covent Garden. As the box-keeper opened the door for him to enter, Katharine Fane, who was seated at the back part of the box, turned round and met him with a smile that set his heart at rest at once. He had been torturing himself, as he drove to the theatre, with all manner of doubts as to the reception Miss Fane would give him now that she had had time to think over his misconduct of last night.

"You are later than I told you to be, Mr. Lawrence"—this she said as Steven took the vacant chair at her side—"but Patti does not come on till the second scene, so you have not lost much. What a crowded house! is it not? To-night is the first time Patti has appeared since her illness, and there is to be a new ballet after the opera. Of course, you know who that is in the royal box? Bella,"—and she leant forward and touched her sister's arm—"here is Mr. Lawrence."

Mrs. Dering turned, and bowed with just decent civility to Steven; Mr. Clarendon Whyte, who was at her side, lowered his eyelids about as much as he had done on their first introduction; Dora Fane stretched out her hand, and welcomed him with a whole roulade of little nods and smiles. "So good of you, Mr. Lawrence! such beautiful flowers!" holding up his bouquet to her lips. "How can I thank you enough for remembering me?"

"I—I must thank you for accepting them, Miss Fane!" said poor Steven. Had Dot been eighty, Steven's tender reverence for everything bearing a woman's shape would have kept him from telling her that he had never remembered her at all. "I was only afraid I took a liberty in sending them." And then he drew back, and with a feeling of perfectly childish disappointment glanced at the bouquet in Katharine Fane's hand—the accustomed bouquet of rare hot-house flowers that Lord Petres' florist had orders to send to Hertford Street every evening during the season.

"I was a little bit jealous about Dot's bouquet, I must confess," she cried, with her ready knack of answering looks rather than words. "These are very beautiful in their way, but I am so passionately fond of all white flowers—stephanotis, most of all—I stole a piece, as you see," bending her neck so that he could better see the flower in her hair, "and made Dot replace it as she could. You must not be angry with me, you know."

"Angry !" said Steven, under his breath. Not another word ; yet, when he had spoken, Katharine Fane felt that they had made a sudden, an enormous leap into intimacy ; and steadily, though her cheek kept its colour, her pulse quickened.

"Here is Patti," she whispered, leaning forward to catch a first glimpse of the little figure that was tripping across the stage to Sulpizio's side, "and we must not speak another word. Now mind, Mr. Lawrence, I expect you to be in raptures. Ah, how pretty she is looking—you dear little creature ! look at her through the glasses, and tell me if you ever saw such a beautiful face in your life."

Steven, as you may imagine, was supremely ignorant of the nature of opera-glasses, and, after one or two ineffectual attempts at using them, declared, boldly, that he saw better with his own eyes.

"Impossible !" said Katharine, "they are the best glasses I ever used. You cannot have the focus right. Let me set them for you—so. Now, isn't she beautiful ? Such eyes, and such a mouth, and such goodness on all the dear little face !"

"She is handsome !" said Steven, as he returned the glasses to Miss Fane's hand, but without the slightest enthusiasm in his tone.

"Handsome ! did you ever see any face more perfectly beautiful ?"

"Yes ; indeed I have, Miss Fane."

After which they were silent again ; Katharine leaning back in her chair, and listening with seemingly rapt attention to the music, and Steven drinking in by every sense the subtle delicious intoxication of her presence : the intoxication to which this fairy scene of light and brilliancy—the stage, the audience, the prima-donna's voice itself—were to him but adjuncts !

Neither then, nor afterwards, was Steven Lawrence anything but a very prosaic Kentish yeoman, as far as expression went : neither

through words, marble or colour, was thought or emotion of his destined, while he lived, to find artistic utterance. Yet, for this one evening, I say that a mysteriously-quickenèd soul passed into the commonplace "sheath of a man," and made him feel, for two hours or so, like a poet and an artist ! He followed the story of the opera with Katharine's help, and—simply carried away by stage virtues and stage passions, like a child—his heart fired at the image of Maria's love for Tonio ; at her agony of grief when she parts from her humble soldier life, her outburst of honest nature when in the midst of her new-gotten wealth and station, she sees Sulpizio, and the dear old *rataplan ! rataplà !* burst, involuntarily as a bird's song, from her lips. Seven or eight months later, Steven happened to hear the *Figlia del Reggimento*, Mademoiselle Patti singing in it again, in Paris, and was just as alive as any other enlightened man would be to the stage tinsel of investing a camp-girl with all this love and faith and generosity of heart. To-night he was a child, a poet, a lover—a believer in everything fair and noble in human nature : even human nature on the boards of Covent Garden Theatre.

"You are as enthusiastic as I meant you to be," said Katharine, during one of the choruses of the second act. "At first you would scarcely allow that Patti was good looking, and now you know you are utterly carried away—ready to throw yourself at her feet !"

"I know that I am carried away," answered Steven, in his candid fashion ; "carried away much further than my wisdom bids me go, but I know also that I have no wish to throw myself at the feet of any woman living, save one, and she is not Mademoiselle Patti."

Now, from a man whom she regarded as an equal, Katharine Fane would have held this speech to be either a stupid impertinence or a still more stupid declaration ; and, for very certain, would have met it with an answer admirably blent of mockery, indifference, and disdain. But after the charge Lord Petres had brought against her of cruelty, she felt it was impossible for her to treat any presumption, any folly of this poor Steven's with undue severity, so did what was, in truth, more fatally cruel than the harshest rebuff she could have dealt him : blushed ever so little, and threw down

her eyes, and then laughed—that gracious low laugh, that to Steven’s mind was such far sweeter music than any in Donizetti’s score.

“You are very faithful to your absent love, Mr. Lawrence ; that is all I can say. There are few men who would not be led away from their allegiance, for an hour, at all events, by such a syren as Patti. Ah ! when you have lived among us longer,” and she sighed, “you will forget all these primitive virtues you have learnt beyond the seas. To be faithful to any one thing or person long, would be poor policy to us men or women of the world !” And she broke off one of the costliest flowers in her bouquet, and scattered it absently, petal by petal, on her dress as she spoke.

Her face, her attitude, her whole expression at this moment, was a picture destined never while he lived to fade from Steven’s memory. He saw her at a hundred future times, when she looked every whit as fair as now—times when he loved her more passionately, perhaps—times when he hated, when he despised her ; but never again did any image of her so sink in upon his heart as on this evening, when, as I have said, he felt for once in his life with an artist’s feeling, and saw with an artist’s eyes. The pure-cut, blue-veined arm, showing bare from cloak or drapery against the crimson hangings of the box ; the throat, white as fresh-hewn marble, but instinct with warm life ; the delicate line of profile ; the parted lips ; the careless hair ;—every smallest detail in that bright picture, it was his misery (and his exceeding happiness) to retain within his memory, living, intact, as in this first moment when his senses—unconscious of all that they were storing for the future—received their register.

“Quite delightful to see your cousin looking so well pleased,” whispered Mr. Clarendon White, with ironical emphasis, into Dot’s ear. “Of course, I don’t presume to understand Miss Fane’s fastidious tastes, still I should not have thought that that—er—pwize-fighter sort of man would have been likely to find favour in her sight.”

“Pwize-fighter sort of man ?” repeated Dot. Poor little Dot ! she was in an excessively bad temper with Mr. Whyte, or she would never have ventured to mimic his peculiar charm of pronunciation. “I may be stupid, but I do not in the least see the

point. Mr. Lawrence is one of the handsomest men I ever saw—so sunburnt and manly-looking, and excellent features as well. Mr. Lawrence, I hope you are not *very* much bored by all this music we are making you listen to ?”

And Dot turned pointedly away from Mr. Clarendon Whyte, and, until Patti’s entrance silenced the house again, continued to give Steven the prettiest smiles, the most coquettish glances and whispers, of which she was capable.

Dot exercising all her little Parisian charms upon the poor back-woodsman, and Katharine Fane friendly and gracious at his side ! Had Steven been anything but the plain single-hearted fellow that he was, some degree of vanity could scarcely have failed to be called forth in him by such a position ; and vanity once set in action would, no doubt, have gone far to save him. But unhappily for himself, the passion, the madness that already filled Steven Lawrence’s breast was too thoroughly genuine to admit of any smaller feeling having place there. A man whose ambition is seriously set on grasping a crown, is not likely to be turned aside by any paltry or personal temptations that beset him on the road.

When the sorrows of the charming little Figlia were just attaining the climax which dramatic art requires the sorrows of all heroines to attain ten minutes before the curtain falls upon their final happiness—Steven at the summit of his Fool’s Paradise—the door of the box opened, and a man’s figure glided quietly into the chair, still unoccupied, behind Katharine.

“Captain Gordon !” she whispered, turning round to the new comer with a smile that made Steven’s heart sink to zero. “Captain Gordon, exactly in time, of course, to be too late ! Why have you not been to see me all this age ? What has become of you ? Have you been out of town, or only lazy, as usual ; and did you know that I was to be here to-night ?”

“I have been out of town, Miss Fane, and lazy also as usual ; and I knew that you were to be here to-night. Is it likely I should have come unless I had known it ? Petres has persuaded me to go to Paris with him to-morrow, and told me where you were to be found, so I just came in for two or three minutes to wish you good-bye.”

Captain Gordon was a man somewhat under forty years of age, with a slow, melancholy way of speaking, a manner indolent almost to effeminacy ; blonde hair and beard already thickly sprinkled with white, and a face that, without being handsome, had something beautiful in the excessive serenity and goodness of its expression. "Une véritable tête de Jésus," poor Gavarni said of George Gordon when he saw him once from the window of his sick-room in Paris.

"Just the sort of man to please these women of the world," thought Steven, taking a thoroughly unfavourable and thoroughly unjust measurement of him in one cold look. "A smooth-tongued, fair-skinned, old dandy, with the pretty manners of a girl, and all the graces his London tailor can put upon him. What chance should a rough-handed, sunburnt savage like me have among them all?"

And he turned away, trying his utmost to look interested in the fate of the lovers on the stage, and indifferent to everything else ; but hearing with preternatural accuracy every word of the friendly farewells, and little commissions for Paris, and commands to be back very soon, and bring Lord Petres back too, that it was Miss Fane's pleasure to whisper into the "old dandy's" ear during the five or six minutes that he remained in the box.

Had Steven known a little better what manner of man that old dandy was, I think, even with all his newly-awakened faculties for self-torture, he would have found it hard to be jealous of Katharine Fane's friendship for him. Katharine, who had never a word to say to carpet-knights of the order of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, was weak exceedingly in her devotion to all genuine hardihood or personal bravery in men. Her veneration for the highest intellect in Europe was second—could you have got her to confess the absolute truth—to what she felt for Garibaldi or for Stonewall Jackson ; and, of all the men she had ever personally known, George Gordon seemed in her eyes the bravest. "Other men go into battles," she would say, "because secondary motives call them there. It is their profession only, or their duty." (This is Katharine's morality, not mine.) "George Gordon seeks danger because he likes danger. No man would go about on battle-fields as he does, helping the wounded on both sides, with only a silk umbrella over his head, unless he had a

lion's heart—and I love him for it!" And George Gordon, quite aware of the state of her affections, had long ago, in Lord Petres' presence, pledged himself seriously to return them in the event of his friend's death before his own.

His love of running about on battle-fields had more than once cost the "old dandy" dear. At Solferino, the weather being hot, he managed to hire a calèche, in which he leisurely drove himself about just outside the French lines, and falling into the hands of the Austrians was on the point of being shot as a spy, when an officer who had known him in Vienna declared him to be English, and a lunatic, and so saved his life. In the Danish war, he and a friend of the same tastes went regularly through the campaign; and at Dybbøl while indifferently succouring wounded Danes and Prussians alike, George Gordon got hit by a spent ball in the leg and lamed for life. During the four visits that he paid to America during the war, his hair-breadth escapes by land and sea would have made a much thicker volume than that of many professional heroes, could he have been induced to write them. It was impossible for any one who really knew the man to accuse George Gordon of affectation or self-glory in his amateur pursuit of danger. Except to the three or four men with whom he was on terms of intimacy, he never spoke of what he had been doing at all; his own brother first knew of his being in the thick of the Danish fighting through seeing his conduct at Dybbøl mentioned in the correspondent's letter of the *Times*. When he was a youngster, his father, an Ayrshire country gentleman, bought him a commission in the Guards; and by five-and-twenty George Gordon had drunk to the dregs the cup of ordinary London ball-room dissipation, and grown sick of it. So he exchanged into a line regiment, then starting for the Crimea; fought steadily through the whole of the Russian war, and at the conclusion of the peace (forced upon us by the French, he always said), sent in his papers in disgust, and left the service. From that time till the present, his life had been spent in dawdling about the West End during the season—yachting or shooting a little in autumn—and, as Katharine said 'helping the wounded on battle-fields, with a silk umbrella over his head,' whenever any fighting happened to be going on about the

world. Ball-going young ladies called him cynical, because he was indifferent to balls and to their society ; but ball-going young ladies, for once, were faulty in their deductions. See George Gordon with children—see the abject slavery to which any human being from the age of two to ten could at once reduce him—and say whether it was possible such a man could be a cynic ! He belonged simply, as far as social ethics went, to the broad school of middle-aged Bond Street philosophers (I fear not a decreasing school), who, in their gilded youth, have learnt to regard young ladies as a species of animated doll—expensive in its tastes, unprofitable as a companion—and who, after five or six and thirty, think scarcely more about them than men of twenty think of tops and marbles.

With Katharine Fane alone, out of all the young women of his acquaintance—Katharine, who, through some strange inconsistency of nature, was full of soft feminine grace, yet not frivolous ; beautiful, yet alive to a great many interests in human life besides her beauty and her dress—would George Gordon, of his own free will, spend more than a quarter of an hour at a time : and with her he was the most charming, the most constant of friends. People of the world, with the world's accustomed gross disbelief in such friendships, had for a long time insisted that Captain Gordon must be one of Miss Fane's rejected suitors, but that the girl was too subtle—think of Lord Petres' wretched health, and his acknowledged distaste for marriage, and George Gordon an elder son !—to let him go. But as George Gordon was a man who, for very many years, had cared nothing for what was said of him, and as Lord Petres not only continued to live, but to show every sign of fidelity to Miss Fane, the intimacy had just gone on until the world had ceased even to fear that no good would come of it.

To say that Katharine Fane was not secretly flattered by the chivalrous devotion George Gordon gave to her, and to her only ; to say that no little feminine intentional art of hers reminded him that he was only a man—left unscathed on sufferance—and she a young and beautiful woman, who might be victor if she chose, would be to say that Katharine was not Katharine. In her friendships, honest and large-hearted though she was, Katharine Fane could no more help

wishing to be a little more than liked than the great queen could help wishing her courtiers to bow to the soft hand of Elizabeth Tudor the woman, rather than to the wisdom and majesty of Elizabeth the Princess. What wonder that Steven, too ignorant to discriminate between the finer shades of friendship, flirtation, and love-making, should feel his heart grow sick as he watched them together? Those pleasant laughs, those low whispers, those full soft glances: every trick of manner that in his folly he had considered as something belonging to himself alone; were accorded just as freely, he saw, to this man with the faded dandy face as they had been to him; as freely as they would be accorded to Lord Petres; to the next man she spoke to; to everybody weak enough to be led astray by them. And five minutes ago he had been ready to tell her that he worshipped her; to throw himself on her pity! *Her* pity! The tender mercy of a woman of the world like this!

As Captain Gordon left the box, and while Steven was getting all the wisdom he could out of his own reflections, and remembering Klaus's story and Lord Petres' warning, and everything else most disagreeable to remember, the curtain slowly fell on the Figlia, and Tonio, and the old sergeant, and the grand Marchesa, all holding each other's hands, and stepping backwards, and bowing and smiling, as happy newly-reconciled relations do—on the stage. And with grim satisfaction Steven realized to himself what a ridiculous gew-gaw piece of trumpery an opera was. These gesticulating foreign men and women singing out their loves and sorrows to the other men and women—actors equally with themselves—who sat round in their boxes and listened. The curtain down, the prima-donna was recalled; twice—three times; and then began one of the usual Patti scenes. Men in the stalls clapping as if they were frenzied; women standing up in the boxes and throwing their bouquets on the stage, on the orchestra—anywhere; Mrs. Dering, and the Miss Fanes, even Mr. Clarendon Whyte, sharing in the general excitement.

"Applaud, Mr. Lawrence, applaud!" cried Katharine. "How can you be so cold? The first time she has appeared since her illness—and look! ah, do look how the princes are clapping!"

But Steven was not in a humour to clap his hands together because he was bid ; and even the example of the princes failed to arouse him into enthusiasm.



CHAPTER XI.

TRANSFORMATION SCENES.

"JEALOUS !" thought Katharine, glancing round, when the house had grown quiet again, at Steven's moody face—"jealous, and not a perfect temper—ah ! you poor, big Steven, what a life is before you ! How good it would be for once to see Lord Petres look like that ! Can a man care much for one I wonder, without being made miserable sometimes ? Could Lord Petres be made miserable by anything except east wind and the doctors ? Mr. Lawrence," very softly.

No answer.

"Mr. Lawrence !" rather louder.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Fane."

"How did you enjoy that last scene of the opera ?"

"Excessively, of course."

"You did not," thought Katharine, "and you shall tell me so before long.—Ah, you are a convert at last, then. You confess that the little Figlia is perfectly charming ?"

"She is a perfectly good actress," answered Steven, more morosely than any man had ever answered Katharine Fane before, "on or off the stage, *that* I am told, is the great secret of all women's charms."

"Mr. Lawrence, please don't be cynical," said Katharine, with thorough good-humour. "If you knew how pleasant it would be to me to meet with some one who would always give his own fresh opinions, not the worn-out opinions of the rest of this worn-out world !"

"You would not like such an one long, I guess," said Steven, bluntly. "No man who spoke the whole truth would be fit company for—for——"

"An artificial, silly fine lady like me," interrupted Katharine. "Very well, then, I have only one thing to ask of you—try. As long as we know each other—and I hope that will be a very long time—speak the truth to me, and see if I ever dislike it. Now, will you?"

"Is the compact to be a mutual one?" asked Steven, wondering as he spoke at his own audacity.

"Mutual! yes, to be sure, if it is in my power to make it so!" cried Katharine, with hearty readiness; "though it will be a more difficult part for me to play than for you, I suspect, Mr. Lawrence. However, I will do my best, and probably, like most other things, the habit of truth-telling can be acquired by practice. Now, do you, speaking under our new compact, think that the chief secret of a woman's charm is that she shall be unreal—a thorough actress, as you said just now?"

"I only repeated what I have been told, Miss Fane," said Steven. "I speak on the authority of a person much better informed in such matters than myself."

"Ah, I understand. Lord Petres has been inoculating you with some of his horrible French heresies. Give me your own opinion, please. I know those of Lord Petres—on all subjects—by heart."

"Miss Fane, the subject is above me altogether. I am a barbarian—in the darkest ignorance respecting everything, except perhaps bears and panthers."

"But you did thoroughly enjoy that bit of Patti's acting in the last scene!"

Steven was silent.

"Why won't you tell me, Mr. Lawrence? I really wish to hear your first frank impressions of everything."

"Well then, as you force me to speak," and Steven looked at her steadily, "I don't believe I heard a note of the music in that last scene at all—my enjoyment in it, and in everything else, was spoilt. Don't you know this just as well as I can tell it you?"

With a man so uncompromisingly sincere as Steven, the most refined coquette, the most finished woman of the world, would have found it hard to hold her ground with plain truth-telling once ad-

mitted between them. Katharine's eyes sank. "I was so sorry to find Captain Gordon was going out of town. I should have liked to introduce him to you. I am sure you would get on well together."

"I think not, Miss Fane, if Captain Gordon is the gentleman to whom you were talking just now. These fine London dandies are not at all in my way."

"Dandies! Oh, I like that! George Gordon is about as much a dandy as Lord Petres, and I hear that you and he have already become fast friends."

"Lord Petres was very kind to me to-day," said Steven, quickly. "I am not so ignorant as to think that a man of Lord Petres' rank and fortune could ever be my friend."

All the native generosity of Katharine's heart—the one quality unspoiled in her by worldly contact—was stirred by his tone. "Difference in rank! What, have you really come back from America with the old-fashioned idea that English people do nothing, at this age of the world, but bow down before the golden calf of birth or station? Why, Lord Petres himself says that the hours of aristocratic principle are numbered." In another twenty years, if we go on as we are doing now, the only possible aristocracy will be that of labour. The rulers of the world will be its workmen."

"That is very well for Lord Petres, in his position, to say," answered Steven, quietly, "and very gracious of you, in your position to repeat. But we live now, not twenty years hence, and I, for one, have not the slightest wish to alter facts as they stand. Lord Petres is a rich man and a gentleman; I am a small farmer, whose bread must be earned by the work of my own right hand. Lord Petres may patronize me. He could never make me his friend, nor should I wish it."

Until now every feeling of Katharine Fane's for Steven had been largely mixed with pity. She pitied him for his honesty; for the mistake that had brought him among them at all; for his prospect of becoming Dot's husband. More than all she pitied while she liked him better for his Quixotic hopeless adoration for herself. In this moment she first distinctly recognized that her new plaything was a man; and her heart went out to him.

"You are proud, Mr. Lawrence, and I like you better for being so. Some day, when you have got really to know us all, I think you will reckon Lord Petres and George Gordon—me, too, I hope—among your friends. George Gordon is one of my firmest allies. He is not, any more than Lord Petres, what is called a ladies' man, generally; but I am afraid I don't get on with ladies' men. All my greatest friends, until now, have been men of the age of Lord Petres—old men, Dot and Bella call them—who have given up balls and young ladies' society a quarter of a century ago. Fine London dandies"—and she gave a glance at Mr. Clarendon Whyte—"are no more in my way than in yours. However we differ in some things, there at least is a bond of sympathy between us from the commencement."

So she charmed his jealousy away: so, in spite of himself, she made him feel that he was to be regarded as one of her friends—a friend on a like footing, on a like equality, with the rest.

"We shall return home very soon now," she went on, as Steven remained silent; "to-morrow, if I can possibly induce Dot to go—I have had enough of London for this season—and then I hope you will get to know us better. We shall expect to see a great deal of you at the Dene."

"And you advise me to come there?" said Steven. "Remember that you have promised to tell me the plain truth in everything! You are good enough to call yourself my friend, and you advise me to come often to your house?"

"I do, indeed, Mr. Lawrence. I know that papa and my mother will be glad to see you, and Dora, too, of course, and——"

The curtain rose upon the first scene of the afterpiece; and Katharine—it was balm hereafter to her conscience to remember—left the sentence unfinished.

"Oh! isn't that lovely?" cried Dot, jumping up, or, rather, down, upon her feet. A sensational tableau, in which stage dresses were to be seen at their best upon the ladies of the ballet, and under the glare of electric light, was the only portion of dramatic art that appealed with real force to Dot's sympathies. "Do you see Mademoiselle Fleuri, Kate? How well she looks in light hair! Mr. Whyte,

is little Fleuri's hair her own, dyed, or false? I always wish so I could see these people close, to know how they make up."

"Mademoiselle's Fleuri's hair is as much her own as anything purchased at an extravagantly high price can be," said Mr. Whyte, with a feeble smile at his own reproduction of this oldest of all poor jokes. "It's the dearest colour in the world—only one shop in Paris supplies it—real blonde cendrée. I can ascertain for you the exact price of the whole coiffure, if you like."

"Price! Why, do you think I want to imitate persons of that kind?" cried Dot, indignantly. "I should have thought wearing my hair four inches long, as I do, would prevent people, at least, from suspecting me of anything false—which I detest. Oh, Katharine! look at the mauve and silver group! made long, I declare, those would be exquisite ball-dresses—and the court ladies, and the pages! I could think myself in Paris again. This is the best thing I ever saw before in England."

The afterpiece was one of those mixed representations, half ballet, half *féerie*, wholly "sensational," which London managers have of late begun so liberally to import from Paris: a representation making no particular attempt at the imitation of nature, striving little after grace, nothing whatever after the awakening of any save "sensational" emotion in the minds of the spectators: an affair altogether of lime-lights and transformations, and scores of well-favoured young women lightly clad in tissue dresses, but which held a refined and educated audience in rapt attention from the moment the curtain rose until it fell. Miss Fane and Mrs. Dering were quite as genuine in their admiration of it all as Dot.

"Is it not wonderfully got up?" said Katharine, turning to Steven, as Mademoiselle Fleuri, after a succession of "daring flights" and breathless pirouettes, was receiving the enthusiastic applause of the stalls and a shower of bouquets more liberal even than had been accorded to Patti. "Is not little Fleuri's dancing good, and the effect of the whole scene admirable?"

"I don't know whether the dancing is called 'good,'" answered Steven. "I believe I have seen the gipsy dancers throw their feet

as high in the streets of Mexico. Of the general effect of the scene, I think I had better give no opinion."

"Yes, please do ; I should like to hear how these theatrical effects strike people who are unused to them."

"Well, then, Miss Fane, I should say the effect—for what it aims at!—is perfect ; but I am pained to see *you* here. It is not, to my mind, a fitting or a decorous scene for a woman to witness."

A blush of angry surprise coloured Katharine's face to the temples. "So much for giving wild Indians the liberty to express their savage instincts!" she thought. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Lawrence, by 'not a fitting scene.' Would I, would my sister, would any of us, be here, if it was not perfectly befitting! You forget yourself a little, I think."

"I remember I was ordered to speak the truth," said Steven, humbly, "and I see that I have offended you. But what is said is said. I spoke only what I meant."

Miss Fane looked away from him without answering a syllable—looked away with an expression of cold dignity which, three minutes ago, Steven would have sworn that soft face was incapable of wearing ; and so the ballet went on. More "daring flights," more fairies dressed in rose-bud wreaths and silver wings, more electric lights, more golden showers. Steven sat it all out in silent misery. That he had by his gross plain speaking irrevocably offended Miss Fane, was certain ; yet for his life he could not have brought himself to soften away, or apologize for that which he had said. Brought up as a boy in austere dissenting horror of theatres, cards, and dancing, Steven, when he found himself his own master at eighteen, had, as a matter of course, become a frequenter of every theatre and gambling-house which the Californian towns offered to him. His temperament (the old temperament of the Lawrences, *pur sang*) was essentially, and in spite of all hereditary or acquired beliefs, a pleasure-loving one ; his capacity for resisting temptation of all kinds small ; his eagerness for present enjoyment far stronger than his dread of future retribution. And still, no uncommon anomaly in characters like his, the prejudices of his early years had remained unshaken long after principle, as applied to his own life,

had succumbed. The old puritanical view of theatres being the outworks of the Evil One had never been stronger in his heart than at this moment. Mademoiselle Fleuri, and the attendant crowd of nymphs and fairies and pages, belonged he thought, to precisely the same class as the gipsy dancers of the Mexican streets; and for eyes as honest as Katharine's to look calmly on at their evolutions was sacrilege! He was too uneducated to know that refined people regard a ballet altogether from an æsthetic point of view; too narrow-minded to remember that what was of the earth to him might, to more highly-cultivated eyes and consciences, be pure. He felt only—as one may imagine a solitary Mahomedan would feel on finding himself among European ladies in a ball-room—that he was assisting at a scene of gross unveiled indecorum, yet one in which he alone out of all the assembled company saw or imagined any evil.

Suddenly, just as the ballet was closing in a flood of rose-coloured light, Katharine turned to him again. "Mr. Lawrence," she said sweetly, "forgive me for speaking as I did! I have been trying during the last quarter of an hour to see things as you—fresh from the bears and panthers—must see them, and at last I have brought myself to feel how natural it was that you should speak as you did. Now, I like a good ballet, and I don't, and never shall, see the slightest harm in it; but then I don't know that I ever see harm in anything. You do. These little differences of opinion will give us the more to talk about. Will you put on my cloak for me?"

She rose, and Steven took a voluminous soft fabric of white cashmere, silk, and swansdown from the back of her chair, and began to turn it round and round—whichever side he turned it finding that it grew more hopelessly unlike a cloak in his grasp. Katharine was accustomed to the attentions of men who knew as much about cashmere and swansdown as she did herself, and something in the yeoman's ignorance pleased her—I suppose by force of contrast.

"Let me help you out of all that labyrinth!" she whispered, looking up with a smile into his embarrassed face, as she took the cloak from him. "These tassels, you see, are supposed to represent a hood,

made so that it cannot by possibility be drawn over any human head ; now, if you would try *once* more ?”

And then Steven, with reverential hands, having put the cloak round her shoulders, she took his arm, in spite of a look from Mrs. Dering, and led the way out of the box.

The lobbies of the theatre were densely crowded that night. Dukes, earls, and commoners—half London—had followed in the wake of royalty to see Mademoiselle Fleuri in the new ballet ; and before a minute had passed, Steven and Katharine found themselves cut off from the rest of the party.

“I see some one has picked up Dora,” said Katharine, looking back across her shoulder, “and Bella is with Mr. Whyte, so we are all right. I never feel easy about Dora in a crowd, until a pretty strong arm protects her ; the poor little Dot might so easily be knocked down and trodden to pieces. Please forgive me, Mr. Lawrence !” This as a great wave of people from the upper staircase made her cling closer to Steven’s arm. “I wonder whether you will ever forget the *peine forte et dure* you have been put through this evening ?”

“I shall remember none of the foreign languages they sang in,” answered Steven, upon whom, as you have seen, French quotations were lost. “I shall remember being with you, and your toleration of my stupidity always. To-night has been to me like the beginning of a new life, Miss Fane.”

A good many of Katharine’s friends came across her on her way out, and all of them—I speak of her female friends—looked, with more attention than London people usually bestow on unknown men, at Steven’s handsome face, towering a good head and shoulders above the common crowd. It had not hitherto been Katharine’s fate to be brought into contact with men of whose natural or physical endowments she could feel proud. Her father, whom she could just remember, was small and delicate ; her step-father, Mr. Hilliard, measured about five feet five in his shooting boots ; Lord Petres was half a head shorter than herself ; and it was with a feeling of weakness, of dependence, absolutely new to her experience, that she clung to Steven’s stout arm, and let him pilot and support her through the

crowd. The existence of those qualities by which Steven Lawrence had been known among his rough mates in the American woods, his hardihood, his strength, his nerve, seemed revealed to the girl, as if by instinct, in this moment, when the only difficulties the poor fellow had to overcome were the clinging laces and training draperies of an avalanche of fine ladies ! and all the men whom she had known hitherto were dwarfed, as she mentally placed them at Steven's side.

"Dot will have a strong arm to uphold her," she thought ; "yes, and a warm heart to love her, when . . . when all this present folly is past, and I am forgotten !" and she sighed.

Steven turned, and saw that she was looking tired and pale. "Miss Fane, you are ill," he whispered tenderly ; "let me make a road for you ! I can, in an instant, if you wish it, and get you into the air ! you look faint."

But Katharine laughed, and declared herself strong enough to bear another hour, if there was need, of her position. "If you knew what we have to go through in London parties," she said, "you would not accuse me of fainting in a crowd like this. I have stood more cruelly trampled upon and crushed than we are now, on a staircase for two hours together at an 'at home,' and called it pleasure afterwards. Ah, my stephanotis !" they had reached the outer vestibule, and were within a yard or two of their own party again, "my poor little bit of stephanotis is falling, and I can't even raise a hand to save it !"

And as she spoke her flower, the only one out of Steven's bouquet that had reached her, fell, to be trodden, of course, into atoms by the crowd.

"The best place for it !" said Steven, with a sudden, bitter recollection of all Lord Petres had said to him,— "the best place for it ;" but there was a kind of question in his voice. "The gift reminds the giver of his place !"

Katharine Fane was silent.

CHAPTER XII.

DOT'S BEAU-IDEAL.

"I THINK if you do marry him that you will be very fortunate, Dot. I think any woman would be fortunate who married Steven Lawrence. Whatever his short-comings in birth or fortune, or outward polish, he is a man. You would never have to blush for him!"

"C'est selon," answered Dot, sharply. "In his place, among ploughed fields and turnips, I am quite ready to allow Steven Lawrence may have his merits. In a drawing-room I should blush for him every ten minutes; if, that is to say, which is very unlikely, I ever became Mr. Steven Lawrence's wife."

The rouge and the gold-dust were gone; the baby-curles pinned tightly back from the temples; the pink silk was replaced by a plain cambric wrapper; and the little shining fairy of the opera had turned into a very old fairy indeed, as she stood before the fire in Katharine's room, talking into the small hours, as her custom was, over the events of the day. Katharine looked at her with a profound feeling of pity as she spoke. To a girl in the flush of her youth and beauty, no sight is more pathetic than that of an unmarried woman eight or ten years older than herself—eight or ten years, all the fair summer that lies so full of promise before *her*, wasted! and the great prize, the prize which is to make up for lost youth and beauty, for vanished conquests, and slaves that are slaves no longer, unattained.

"If you despise Steven Lawrence and his suit now, you may repent it some day, Dora. Balls and operas, and gentlemen like Mr. Clarendon Whyte, are very well for a certain time, but——"

"But Dora Fane is within a few months of thirty," interrupted Dora, bitterly, "and having missed all better chances in her youth must marry the first decent man who offers to her, or be a poor dependant for life. You need not be afraid of *that*, Katharine? I would fifty times sooner go on the stage, when you marry, than have to live upon my relations any longer; indeed, I am not sure I wouldn't sooner do it than marry a man like Steven Lawrence. The

disgrace to Bella would be greater," cried Dot, with a flash of the eyes, "and I should be more amused myself. I like the stage, and everything belonging to it, and I loathe the country, and everything belonging to it—yeomen especially."

And genuine tears came into Dora Fane's eyes as she stood and stared disconsolately at the fire. "Me in a farm-house?" she broke out, as Katharine kept silent. "Me going to a disgusting meeting-house! Me, with my delicate chest, on that bleak Kent coast from one year's end to the other. I wish I was dead. I wish I had been left among the people who suited me in Paris. What do I care for the good name of all the Fanes or Hilliards who ever lived? What benefit will my old family ever be to me, I should like to know?"

"None at all, my dear Dora," answered Katharine, kindly. "The happiness of your own future life is all I care about, and I do think you would be happier married, and living quietly in a home of your own now—yes, even if that home was a Kentish farm. The meeting-house you need not go to, unless you choose, and I don't see how Ashcot can be much bleaker than the Dene, where you have lived in very tolerable health for the last fifteen years of your life."

"And I," said Dot, "think that you are altogether mistaken. I am not one of those women whose ideas of happiness are marriage, marriage, and again marriage! If I marry a man I don't like, I shall be miserable, and make him miserable too. Marriage without love—although you do call me half French—is a crime in my eyes," said Dot, loftily.

"I am glad to hear you speak so, Dot," was Katharine's answer, "When you wrote to Mr. Lawrence, when I received him here on his arrival, I certainly thought you were prepared to like him. You do not, it seems. The matter is at an end."

"I wish you wouldn't take me up so, Katharine. I'm not clever like you, and I can't argue, and I'm sure, Kate, you are the last person who ought to be hard on any one for being changeable! I don't at all wish to give up poor Steven Lawrence, if I was sure of his intentions, and I can't help liking people who are unworthy, and—and I have been very badly treated!" cried Dot, dissolving in earnest now. "You may talk of Frenchwomen as you like. I don't

think any Frenchwoman could flirt more than Arabella does. If she calls it high-principled, I do not ! Why doesn't she look after her children ? Why doesn't she let the poor dear old General have a home by his own fireside ? Tell me that, Katharine !"

"The poor old General prefers his club, as you know very well, Dot, and Bella, far from neglecting her children, is devoted to them. I think her an admirable wife," said Katharine, warmly. "There are few women as handsome, and as much sought after as Bella, of whom the world speaks so well. As to flirtation, I hate ever to hear the word applied to a married woman at all."

"You may hate the word, but Bella does not hate the thing," cried Dot, firing more and more. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Kate, but I will say, that if there is one quality I *despise* more than another in a woman, it is hypocrisy ; and Bella has behaved with cruel—yes, cruel—hypocrisy as regards Clarendon Whyte. When he first used to come to this house did he, or did he not, like me best, Katharine ? I ask you frankly."

"I should say Clarendon Whyte never liked anything living except himself," answered Katharine. "His heart seems to me to be just as empty as his head. You are not——" and she laid her hand kindly on her cousin's, "Dora, it is not possible that you care really for such a man ?"

"It matters little whether I do or not," said Dot. "To-night—well, Kate, you never betray anything, and I don't mind telling you the truth—to-night I *did* believe that he was going to speak. Something he said last night gave me the right to think so ; and of course, if he had, there would have been nothing of dishonour, as things stand now between me and Mr. Lawrence, in my accepting him. I've been very uncertain of late, and I tried to keep—I mean, I did not want to give absolute discouragement to anybody. You understand ?"

Katharine nodded shortly.

"And now, to-night, you saw Bella's conduct ; talking to him the whole evening ; turning his brain," Katharine's eyes looked an interjection, "as she can, in her quiet manner, when she chooses ; and of course I am farther from him than ever ! Do you call it honour,

Katharine? I won't use the word you dislike to hear applied to your sister; I simply ask this: *do* you call it honour?"

"If I could hear Bella's account of it, I should probably call the whole thing sheer absurdity," said Katharine coolly. "As if Bella would stoop to any small meanness! as if Bella could care, except as an escort to and from her carriage, for a man like Mr. Whyte. He happened to murmur rather more about himself, and about his conquests, into her ear than into yours to-night, Dot, and you are weak enough to be angry. If it were otherwise—if I could believe for a moment that you ever had a serious thought of marrying Clarendon Whyte, and that Bella, directly or indirectly, kept you from doing so, I say that you should thank her as the best friend you have. In the first place, as you know, Mr. Whyte is poor, and poverty for the wife of a man like that would be simple and utter misery."

"Yet you advise me to marry Steven Lawrence?"

"Indeed I do not, Dora. After what you have been saying, I should be very sorry to advise you to marry any one. Steven Lawrence's fortune, humble as it is, might, with his habits, enable him to keep his wife in comfort. Mr. Whyte's fortune, with his habits would, I should think, ensure to *his* wife starvation! So much I do say."

"You have grand ideas, Kate. You forget that every one cannot marry men like Lord Petres. If—if—Clarendon Whyte had asked me," cried poor little Dot, sadly, "I would have married him, and done the best I could. I like him, *allez*! He has brains enough for me. You know I don't care for the way any of your friends talk. I never pretend to be clever. Even Steven Lawrence, though I dare say he can hardly read and write, bores me; I suppose because he is intelligent. I hate intelligence. I hate to hear about those horrid tropical beasts and plants, just as I should hate to have to go to the British Museum and look at them, and it's all acting when I pretend to be interested in such things."

"And what do you care heartily for, Dot dear? I have often wished to know."

"I care for Clarendon Whyte's conversation, Katharine. He talks of things that are really interesting."

"Of himself, that is to say, Dot? For one evening of my life, very long ago, I brought myself to listen to Clarendon Whyte's conversation, and, in as far as that distressing impediment of speech of his allowed me to follow him, I found that all his dark hints and little fragments of narrative told one story—the number of his conquests, and the quantity of peace of mind that he had wrecked."

"Well, and if it was true!" interrupted Dora. "Can a man help being handsome, and gifted with that sort of fatal influence, I should like to know?"

"True or false, Dot, I think an honest man would keep perfect silence on such a theme. To boast, even mentioning no names, of such conquests, seems to me untrue to all our English ideas of manliness. For a girl, talking among girls, to make much of her little ball-room triumphs, may pass, though I should not think over-highly of one who did. For a man to seek the reputation which that man seeks, he must be—a Mr. Clarendon Whyte! I can say nothing stronger.

"But still, you see, I like him," said poor Dot, with unanswerable logic. "I haven't your views of Englishmen and English honour. You say sometimes Clarendon Whyte is like the hero of a bad French novel. I dare say he is, and I dare say that is why he suits me. I haven't the Fane nature—there is the truth. Your beau-ideal of happiness is to spend six weeks of the year in London, and the remainder at a country house, among wet fields, with dogs and guns and hunters. Mine is a little apartment on the fifth—sixth, seventh, if you will, but in Paris; and never to stir out of Paris till I die."

"And Clarendon Whyte for a companion?"

"Clarendon Whyte, or some one else of his low intellectual standard; some one, at least, who would like what I liked, and always be well-dressed and distinguished-looking, when we happened to go out together, and never want to come back to England. You think me a greater fool than I am, Katharine. In a life like that, I could make any sacrifice for my husband: live on bread and salad—and I know the meaning of what I say—anything, so that he could have his distractions, and me, mine, *bien entendu*! English

middle-class comfort ; heavy joints every day ; suet puddings for the servants ; plain dress and no amusements for the master and mistress—I hate it ! I hate the very thought of it !” cried Dot, clenching one of her small fists. “And I hate the evil chance that first took me from a life that suited me better.”

“Dot,” said Katharine, colouring, “that is ill said of you. Dislike England and English people if you will, but don’t deny that papa has been your truest friend. Don’t say that the home he gave you at the Dene was worse than the home from which he took you.”

“I know that it has been a worse one to me,” said Dot, unblushingly. Gratitude was not one of the virtues this poor little warped nature possessed. “If I had stayed in the Faubourg Saint Marceau, I should have grown up a bourgeoisie, of the smallest bourgeoisie, if you like—a milliner making up caps of six sous, who knows ? but Parisienne ! Parisienne !”

A glow of real feeling, which became her better than all rouge and gold-dust, came across her face. “Fifteen years ! fifteen years of youth, I should have been living, not existing !”

“And what about the future, Dot ?” asked Katharine ; “all this might have been very well while your youth lasted, but for the future ?”

“I should have died in Paris, at least,” said Dot, quietly. “There is no use talking to you, Katharine. You English don’t care a bit really for your country, or why should you run over the world as you do to get away from it ? Love of Paris, with us Parisiennes,”—she seemed to grow an inch taller as she said this—“is a passion. I’m like the queen—who was it?—when I die ‘Paris’ will be written on my heart ! and, in the meantime, I shall marry Steven Lawrence of Ashcot—when he is wearied, that is to say, of his hopeless adoration of my beautiful cousin Katharine.”

She laughed, one of those loud shrill laughs, which came with such weird want of music from her small throat and baby mouth, and, kneeling down by Katharine’s side, stretched out her little hands to the fire.

“Does Steven Lawrence really amuse you, as the tailor-poet did,

Kate? or are you trying to make me accept him, as you used to make me take my draughts when I had the influenza, do you remember, by tasting them first, and pretending you liked them? When I saw you leave the box on his arm to-night, I could not help asking myself what the meaning of all the little play was. Katharine Fane—Lady Petres in a few months' time—showing herself before half London, on the arm of Steven Lawrence, yeoman farmer, of the parish of Clithero, Kent."

"The meaning of the 'little play,'" said Katharine, stoutly, "is that Katharine Fane chose to please herself, just as she will continue to do when she is Lady Petres. If I had left Steven Lawrence to the tender mercies of you and Bella, you would, either of you, have thrown him over, if any one you thought better of had offered you an arm. And I did not choose that he should be thrown over! Putting your affairs altogether aside, Dot, I mean that Steven Lawrence shall be well treated in our house. Papa is sure to get on with him: Lord Petres likes him: I like him myself. As to being seen by half London on the arm of a yeoman, I would just as soon be seen there as on the arm of a duke. You know very well whether I have any nonsense of that kind in me or not."

"You are in a position where it is graceful to show humility, Katharine. The future wife of Lord Petres can afford, better than most women, to play at socialism—for as to believing any, yes, any; Englishwoman is not an aristocrat at heart, I don't! Now confess, Kate, as we are telling plain truths to-night, that you did feel ashamed of being seen with Steven Lawrence? I shan't think a bit the worse of you. Say it out."

"As we are speaking plain truths," said Katharine, "I will confess that I felt unaffectedly proud of Steven Lawrence the whole time that I was with him. It seemed to me that half the people in the crowd turned to look at him, Dot. Old Madame de Castro whispered to me in her bad English that I was on the arm of the only handsome man she had seen in England; the Phantom fought her way with her usual energy through the mob to ask me if 'our friend' would be in town for Lady Dacres' ball on the first? and how unconscious Steven Lawrence himself was of it all!"

"What! the Countess de Castro really said that of Steven Lawrence?" cried Dot. "The Phantom really offered to get him an invitation to the Dacres' ball? Well, you know, I do think him very handsome myself! I do think, by the time he gets more manner and style, he will be almost distinguished-looking. What did he say when you told him about Lady Dacres' ball?"

"I never told him about it at all, Dora. I can imagine no greater cruelty than to tempt a man like Stephen Lawrence into going to a great London party. Why (as we shall be out of town), the poor fellow would not have a single person to speak to the whole night."

"As we shall be out of town!" repeated Dot, looking very blank. "Why, when do you mean to go home, Kate?"

"To-morrow, Dot, please. Now that Lord Petres is gone, I don't see the object of my staying any longer—and I know Bella wants my room for some terrible maiden cousin of the General's; the rich Miss Dering who has been godmother to the whole of the children, and never given anything but an illuminated book-marker between them yet! But my going has nothing to do with yours, unless you choose."

"Thank you, Katharine. If your sister would take me to every party and theatre in town, I would not stay under her roof when you are gone. To-night has opened my eyes to the extent of Arabella's *friendship* for me. And so to-morrow we return to our eleven months of country! Oh, dear! I suppose I may as well be off to bed. I shan't sleep, but there is nothing more to talk about here. What a weary play life is!" And Dot rose, yawned drearily, and then stooped and kissed her cousin on each cheek. Whatever small French customs the poor little thing had been allowed to retain—this among others—she clung to with almost touching pertinacity.

When she had got into the passage, a sudden thought seemed to cross Dot's brain; and, turning the lock noiselessly, she re-entered her cousin's room, and walked back again to the fireside. Katharine believing herself to be alone for the night, was already upon her knees at her prayers; and Dot had to tap her sharply on the shoulder twice before she could recall her to the things of this world.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Katharine—though how people can go

in a moment from frivolous talk to religion is what I don't understand—but there's something I particularly want to ask you. Did—did—” Dora Fane actually had the grace to be half confused—“did Steven Lawrence say anything to you about the photograph I sent him?”

“My dear Dora,” said Katharine, looking up from her kneeling position with beautiful dignity, “I have asked you before not to break in upon me like this. You would not interrupt me if I was kneeling at any earthly throne.”

“Because I should not have the chance,” cried Dot, another of whose missing virtues was reverence. “Please, Kate, don't look so severe. If you prayed extempore, like Bella and the General, it would be different, but your high-church paters and aves can surely be taken up at any point where you like to break off. Now, did Steven Lawrence say anything about the photograph? I won't keep you a moment.”

“He showed it to me, Dora,” said Katharine, with austere abruptness. Was it to be expected that she could treat any matter forced upon her at such a time with levity?

“Showed it?—does he carry it about with him? Oh, Katharine dear, does he wear it?”

“He does. In a locket.”

“And—thinks it like?”

“Very like.”

“And—you didn't tell him anything, Kate? It was very foolish of me, but you know people say, in photographs, how alike we are—and I had not a copy of mine left—and really I never thought of anything serious at that time. Now, you didn't betray me?”

“I don't see what I had to betray, Dora.”

“And Mr. Lawrence seems satisfied?”

“Very. Still, as he is neither devoid of reason nor eyesight, I should, if I were in your place, explain the whole mistake to him at the first opportunity that offered itself.”

“Good-night to you, Katharine.”

“Good-night to you, Dora.”

And then Dot took herself off for good to her own apartment (to fall

asleep in five minutes and dream that she was a Parisian stage fairy with a parterre of men like Mr. Clarendon Whyteall throwing her bouquets), and Katharine Fane was left to finish her meditations in peace.

They kept her up later than usual to-night ; for after what Dot called the "paters and aves," came a long prayer—the original of which was never learnt from any prayer-book or missal !—and when the beautiful face was lifted at last, unmistakable traces of tears were on her cheeks. "Poor Dot's restless heart shall be brought to happiness yet, if I can help her there," she thought, as she laid her head on her pillow. "When—when I am married, they shall both come and stay with me, and in time I will bring Dot back to the true faith—and, perhaps. . . ."

And she slept and dreamed of an old farm-house, and harvest-time, and Steven !—the pleasantest dream that Katharine Fane had ever dreamed in her life ; but one from which the figures of Lord Petres and her cousin Dora were both, by some strange accident, missing !



CHAPTER XIII.

THE RETURN TO ASHCOT.

THE east wind that had driven Lord Petres out of England was gone ; soft rains had fallen in the night ; and all the Kentish lowlands were smelling sweet of summer, as Steven on the following afternoon drove from the village station, six or eight miles beyond Canterbury, to his old home.

He knew every object along the road by which he had to pass : the "two-bridges" that side by side crossed the Stour and the canal ; the cleft in the schoolhouse wall through which the knotted ivy-roots had made no perceptible progress since he was a boy ; the little roadside hamlet half way to Clithero, with its low red roofs and stagnant horse-pond and churchyard, to whose white slabs ten years seemed scarcely to have made an increase ; how strangely familiar it all was ! Here and there, among the middle-aged and old, he came across a face he knew ; but no answering look of recognition met

him anywhere ; the young people and children were, of course, absolute strangers, all ; and Steven felt with a sort of pang that he belonged to a bygone generation as he looked at them. Would the people at Ashcot, would old Barbara, who had rocked him in his cradle, remember him, if he were to appear suddenly in his own house without telling them what name he bore ? An unwise fancy for trying the experiment took hold upon him as he drew near home ; and as soon as he reached the first outlying cottages of the village of Clithero he stopped, discharged the carriage he had hired at the station, and going into a little vine-covered public house by the roadside, asked the fresh-looking country girl who was standing within the bar for a glass of ale.

The girl was about nineteen years of age, and as she handed the handsome stranger his tankard, with a blush and a smile, Steven Lawrence remembered her face, and how a dozen years ago she had been one of the many child-sweethearts whose affections he had possessed in Clithero. Had she forgotten the very sound of his name ? he wondered ; was she called Polly—had she a real sweetheart now ? He looked down at the girl's left hand, and saw with a childish feeling of satisfaction that it carried no ring. She was not married then. Little Polly Barnes, at least, remained out of the old buried life of his boyhood ! Somewhat shyly he hazarded a remark or two about the neighbourhood, and Polly, setting him down as a tourist, began at once with professional volubility, to make the most of all the great people within her small reach. It had been very dull in the country this spring, but most of the good families were coming back now. Lord Haverstock returned yesterday, and the Miss Fanes were expected in a day or two. The gentleman had heard of the Miss Fanes, of course ?

Yes ; the gentleman was familiar with the name.

Miss Katharine—or, indeed, Miss Fane, for poor Miss Dora was only a cousin—was to be married in the autumn to my Lord Petres, one of the richest noblemen in England, and a Catholic, which Miss Fane had always been inclined to, it being her own papa's religion, and it was expected it would be a very grand wedding, and—

"And what other people live about here now ?" said Steven, cutting

Polly short in her aristocratic histories. "I mean people of the lower class. Who holds Brenton farm?"

"Brenton farm? la, sir, what you know the neighbourhood then! Oh, old Tillyer leases Brenton still. He has leased it for the last five and twenty years, I've heard my father say."

"And Ashcot?"

The girl shook her head. "Ashcot, sir, at present is farmed by Francis Dawes; but it belongs, you know, to the Lawrences. You've heard tell of them, no doubt?"

"I have," said Steven, "often heard their name. Joshua Lawrence is dead, I suppose?"

"Dead—yes, and his son, young Josh, after him," answered Polly; "broke his neck, as half the Lawrences do, sir, when he wasn't over sober; and now the land belongs to one Steven Lawrence, an idle, good-for-nothing sort of chap, I believe—ran away when he was a boy, through jealousy of his cousin Josh, and nothing good been heard of him since. They do say he's expected home again now; but father thinks he's more likely to sell the farm for what it will fetch, than come back and work on it. The Lawrences were always a bad lot, sir. Grandfather remembers them fifty years ago, and he says, grandfather does, in spite of their Wesleying ways, that running ashore a cargo of French silks and brandies on a dark night, and without giving the Queen her dues, was always the vocation" (Polly had been to a boarding-school) "best suited to a Lawrence."

A quickly-checked smile came round the corners of Steven's mouth. Old Jacob Barnes, he remembered well, had, in his day, been one of the most noted smugglers of the whole coast, from Deal to Pegwell; and as he smiled, the girl looked at him fixedly.

"I—I'm almost certain I've seen your face before, sir!" she cried. "Surely, it can't be? oh, la!" and Polly's round cheeks got crimson.

"Surely, it can't be Steven Lawrence himself?" said Steven, with his hearty laugh. "The idle, good-for-nothing kind of chap who ran away through jealousy of his cousin Josh? Ah, Polly, you're nicely caught. In spite of their 'Wesleying ways,' no occupation so fitted to a Lawrence as running ashore a cargo of French brandies without giving the Queen her dues! Now suppose, just to make up

and in remembrance of old days, you give me a kiss, Polly?" And Steven caught Miss Barnes's plump red hand and stooped his head down to her level. "You and I are very old sweethearts, you must remember?" he whispered.

"Oh, sir! Mr. Steven, please!" cried the girl, snatching her hand away from him; "you must excuse me for all I said, and—and everything else, sir. Times are changed, Mr. Steven, and—I was asked in church for the first time last Sunday. Peter Nash, sir, please, of the Mill."

Polly Barnes—the baby Polly, who used to tease to overload him with her kisses—"asked in church." Will you believe me when I say that Steven Lawrence felt a pang of actual pain at the thought? Polly Barnes blushing and looking conscious about Peter Nash of the Mill, the red-haired young ruffian whose head had so often received condign punishment from his own knuckles in the days when Peter had been wont to convey, by hideous faces and aggressive pantomime of all kind at meeting-house, his utter derision for Steven's turn-down collars and general fastidiousness of dress! How absolutely null, from Katharine Fane down to little Polly Barnes, was his share in any human being's life! how entirely unmoved the whole world would have been if the "Oneida" had foundered at sea, instead of bringing back the idle good-for-nothing Steven Lawrence safe to his native land. What a mistake this experiment was, of guaging by too sharp a test the kind of remembrance in which his early friends held him! Better have given them all timely notice; better have had the fatted calf killed; better have been met, after his ten years of exile, with the outward welcome due to the repentant prodigal at least.

He left little Polly gazing after him, her hand shading the sunlight from her blue eyes, on the threshold of the inn door ("quite the gentleman now," thinks Polly, in her simplicity; "I shouldn't wonder if Lucy Mason, with all her pride, was to take a fancy to him!"): and in another ten minutes stood at the same angle of the old London road, from whence he had looked back through his boyish tears at Ashcot, on that April night, ten years ago, when he believed himself to be quitting it for ever. The low white house, the

homely garden, with the sweet May sunshine shining on its flowers, were unchanged ; here at least was comfort ! Whatever else had passed away, home was the old home still ; and a feeling nearer akin to womanly weakness than he had known for years came with a sudden flood across the yeoman's stout heart as he stood and looked at it. He pushed his way through a gap in the flowering untidy hedge ; there were a great many gaps in the hedges around Ashcot now ; and a thrill almost like the thrill of love went through his blood. He was standing on his own land once more ! How fresh the grass fields looked, knee-deep in blood-red sorrel and foaming meadow-sweet, and with their tangled hedges of wild hop, briar and hawthorn !—Steven felt as a man, not a farmer, in this moment—how much fairer in his eyes was all this vivid English verdure than the bewildering exotic gorgeousness of the tropics, with which his eyes had grown sated ! With what subtle power the delicate half-bitter aroma of the hawthorn touched his brain, and brought back, as only the sense of smell can do, before him a hundred pictures : each bright and distinct, yet blending all mysteriously into one : of the happy springs before Josh and his mother ever came to Ashcot ! He marched on through the tall weed-grown grass down towards the house, and a small boy at work in the next field, happening to spy him, threw up his arms in the air, and shouted out to him that he was trespassing ! (When I use the expression “at work,” I use it in its most restricted and relative sense. No one worked much at Ashcot now ; only, the boy happening to be a nephew of Dawes, the estate was charged with eightpence a day for providing him in birds'-nesting, rat-hunting, and other rural means of passing his time). Steven was immensely tickled at the idea of being warned as a trespasser off his own land, and sang out such a loud cheery “all right !” by way of answer, that the urchin concluded he was some friend of his uncle's, privileged to trample down standing grass or any other crop he chose, and went back to his present labour of threading birds' eggs on a reed with philosophic calmness.

“The place hasn't what I should call a look of work about it,” thought Steven, as he neared the house, and marked the broken-down fence and straggling branches of the little orchard, once so

trim and orderly. "Four o'clock in the afternoon—the men can't be gone home; yet—and not a soul to be seen. They must be at work round in the five-acres." And pushing open a wicket-gate, so shaky that it almost lurched off its hinges under his hand, he entered one of the side walks of the garden—the garden that had once been Mrs. Steven's special pride, and where, in Steven's childhood, every flower strong enough to bear the rough foreland blasts had been tended with loving care.

It was not, like the farm lands, actually neglected as yet; the borders were free from weeds, the walks were not grass-grown, such hardy spring-flowers as wanted no especial nurture were in bright flower in the beds; the lilacs and guelder-roses above the parlour-window were all a mass of clustering odorous blossom. Steven walked round to the front porch, never doubting that he would see the door wide open, as in old days, the cheerful afternoon sun shining in upon the houseplace. The door, however, was not only shut but locked. The blinds in the front windows were all down; not a sound but the distant wash of the tide upon the sands, the humming of the great wild-bees among the honey-suckles that covered the porch, broke silence. "Is a funeral going on?" thought Steven, "or doesn't Barbara take the trouble of living here, or what! Let no man try the experiment of coming back a day sooner than he is expected to his own house again!" He gave a long impatient pull at the bell, and on the instant a shrill chorus of pugnacious barks made itself heard within. After this came a woman's voice—how well he knew it!—bidding the dogs "be silent, with their foolishness," and then the door opened, as far as a stout door-chain would allow, and he was requested by some unseen speaker, three or four sets of vicious teeth showing themselves ready through the chink for his legs, to make his pleasure known.

"My pleasure, Barbara," said Steven, as if he had not been absent a day, "is to come in. What the deuce is the meaning of all these bolts and bars and yelping curs, that you have taken to since I left?"

"Master—*Master Steven!*" cried the voice, a whole world of welcome in its tone. "Dear heart, that you should come like this—and me not so much as begun the cleaning!" And the chain was slipped,

the dogs with one or two vigorous kicks were sent to the right-about, and an erect, handsome old peasant woman, her face white and quivering with emotion, came out into the porch. "Master Steenie—my boy—sir, how you have grown ! but the same face, the same smile still !"

Steven seized both her hands in his, then kissed the withered fine old cheek, just as he used to do when he came home, a little lad, for the holidays, to be at once the torment and the pride of Barbara's life. "And so you remembered me at once, Barbara !" he said, as she clung to him, and gazed up in silence at his bronzed manly face—so fair and boyish when she saw it last. "I knew you wouldn't expect me for another week, at least, and I just thought I'd come upon you unawares and frighten you a bit. I met a good many faces I knew as I drove along from the station, Barbara, but I could see that I was a stranger to them all. You knew me by my voice alone."

"Knew you, Steenie ? why I should have known you among ten thousand : and to think you should have come so ; that you should have been made to wait on your own doorstep ! Get along, Vixen—let me catch you sniffing anigh your master again, miss ! 'Tis lonesome at Ashcot now, Steenie," added Barbara, in apology for the dog's ignorance, "and of an afternoon I mostly bar the door and let the dogs out to protect the house like. But please to come in, sir," she interrupted herself, breaking suddenly from familiarity to respect. "There's no fire in the parlour, but I can catch up one in a minute, and——"

"And what's gone of the kitchen, then ?" interrupted Steven, walking straight on through the houseplace—wonderfully low this houseplace had become ! he had to stoop his head not to knock it against the centre rafter now. "Have folks grown so fine of late years, that they must sit all day in the parlour, or what ?"

And pushing open a door, he entered the comfortable old farm kitchen, where his grandfather's armchair still stood beside the open fireplace, his grandfather's watch still hung suspended over the mantelshelf, and felt himself at home ! He had not felt so before since his arrival in England. The landing at Southampton ; the short, too sweet episode of London and of Katharine Fane ; his drive to—

day among changed and unknown faces from the station ; the first moment, even, in which he had trodden upon his own land ; all had savoured of unreality—all in different ways had reminded him that he, Steven Lawrence, was an alien, and that his own country and his own people knew him not. Here, in the old farm kitchen—by the fireside where the Christmas songs of twenty years ago had been sung, with Barbara, unaltered in face, and dressed in the same prim methodist fashion as of old at his side : the great clock ticking with its familiar burr, the jugs and dishes ranged in precisely the same order as they used to be upon the shelves—he felt that a place was still kept for him in the world. The past was at length bound up visibly, before his senses, with the present. He was at home.

"You look younger than ever, Barbara." And as he spoke he seated himself in the corner that was always called "Steenie's" when he was a child, and turned kindly to the old servant, who, with wet eyes, stood aloof and admired him, while she held a corner of her apron tight upon her trembling lips. "You, and the place by the fireside here, seem the only old friends I have left."

"Ay, lad, you may say so," she answered, coming close to him, but with instinctive delicacy remaining standing ; for Barbara, like Polly Barnes, decided that Steven looked quite the gentleman now. "The Lord has pruned away the unprofitable branches. 'Woe to him,' we read, Steven, 'that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house that he may set his nest on high.' From the first day that I seen Mrs. Joshua—and an unhandier woman, and a foolisher, no ill respect to the dead, never entered a house—locking up here, and locking up there, as though those who had served her husband's family faithful would have stooped to rob *her*, and wasteful in her own ways as her son was after her—from the first day as I seen a fine lady flaunting about the farm, in her black sating and gold chain, and setting up her pony-shay and going to church, ay, and taking young Josh, a Lawrence by blood, with her, 'because the gentry didn't go to meeting-house'—I said to your mother, 'Mrs. Steven,' I said, 'those that live long enough 'll see want and ruin brought home to the Lawrences.' And my words were true ones, Steenie."

"Not quite, I hope, Barbara," answered Steven, cheerfully. "Josh

didn't do over well for himself, I know, and I dare say I shall find things a good bit in arrears, but while the land's mine, and I've an arm to work it, I don't think we need talk of ruin or want coming near you and me. Is Dawes about the rick-yard, or where? I must send one of the carts over for my luggage to the station, but I didn't see man or boy at work on the whole farm as I came down the close."

Barbara took her apron away from her lips, and passed it along the edge of the kitchen-dresser, already white and spotless as a new-washed platter. "Dawes is not here, Master Steven, nor the men neither, and there's no one at work. Me, and, maybe, young Bill Dawes, bird's-nesting, are the only souls on the farm to-day."

Steven watched the expression of the old servant's face, as she answered him, and a quick suspicion of the truth crossed his mind. "Are the potatoes hoed, Barbara? is there no work of any kind going on? The hill side is potato-set this year, I see, but the ridges didn't strike me as looking over clean, from the distance."

"Master Steven," said Barbara, holding up her head erect, and folding her arms tight across her chest; "you musn't ask me how things are done on the farm now, sir. Except to tidy up a bit about the garden, for respect of those that are gone, and of you, too, my dear, far away though you were, I haven't left the house from one Lord's day to another, since Josh died. If I was to give my opinion, Steven, speaking from general knowledge of Dawes and his ways, I should say the potatoes was *not* weeded, nor hoed, nor anything done to them since they was planted. If you came down along the vicar's close and seen the grass, that rank and weed-grown as was the finest bit of hay for miles round, you needn't ask many more questions about the farm, I should say."

Steven got up and walked to the open kitchen-window, from whence the greater part of Ashcot farm was visible, and, at a glance he took in its condition. The straggling fences, the wild rank grass, the partial growth of the green corn, the unhoed potato-fields—all, now that his eyes had got back the old business habit of seeing things, cried out aloud of neglect, of an unjust steward, of an absent master. He stood for a minute or more without speaking, then came back to the fire-side, and stood there, his broad shoulders resting back against

the high old-fashioned mantelshelf, took out a pipe from his breast-pocket, and lit it.

"Barbara," said he, after he had smoked for two or three minutes, in silence, "I see pretty well how things stand. The cure will be short and sharp. How long has Francis Dawes treated the land like this?"

"Always, Master Steven," answered Barbara, laconically. "It was a year or so after you ran—after you left, sir—that your uncle first took him, him and his," and Barbara's eyes kindled, "upon the farm. Mister Joshua was failing in body and heart—there's the truth of it. What with his wife, and her fine-lady ways, and young Josh's wildness, and your leaving us, Steenie, he wasn't to say the same for years before his death, and Dawes, bit by bit, got to do as he liked on the farm. Then came Mrs. Joshua's death, and your uncle's, and young Josh, who knew no more about the farm than a baby, was master."

"Go on : Dawes robbed the lad?"

"Steven," said old Barbara, "'rob' is not a word to use lightly. Everything on the place lay, as you may say, under Dawes' hand, and——"

"And he abused his trust? Speak out, Barbara."

Barbara hesitated, and her fingers twitched a little at the white kerchief that was pinned across her breast. To toil, to save for the Lawrences, had been, for more than thirty years, the beginning and end of her life. To see Steven back in his rightful place, and Dawes dispossessed, had been the one hope which had kept her steadfastly to the farm since young Josh's death. But it was a part of Barbara's religion to speak positive ill of no man. The Lord could execute His judgments, she was accustomed to say, without help or hindrance of hers. Steven might see with his own eyes the rank weed-grown meadows. Basing her opinion on broad and general grounds, Barbara did not hesitate to state that the potatoes had neither been weeded nor hoed once since they were planted. Such words as robbery or betrayal of trust, could scarcely have been evoked by less than torture from her lips.

"I reprove no man, Steven, and I rejoice in no man's fall. You will see the state of the farm, you will cast up Francis Dawes' accounts with him, and judge for yourself of the man's stewardship."

"That will I," said Steven, promptly, "The state of the farm I have seen. The accounts, poor scholar though I am, I'll over-haul with Dawes to-night."

"Not to-night, Steven. Dawes and his sons are away to Stourmouth fair, and when they return 'twill be late, and——"

"And what else, Barbara?"

"Francis Dawes won't be just in a state to look over account-books with you, Steven—there's the truth."

"I see. We'll have them out to-morrow."

"To-morrow is the Sabbath, sir."

"I forgot," said Steven, hastily; "I've lived a life, Barbara, that has made me forget the days of the week sometimes; you do right to remind me. Monday, then, shall be the day of reckoning: and now—now let us talk of other things. How did my uncle die, and Josh? I believe when I was young, I was harsh on the boy. There was no other evil in him than being his mother's son, I believe."

"Evil enough," said Barbara, solemnly, "evil enough, the Lord knows! When once a lad has his head set up above his rank, and begins to hanker after the ways and follies of the gentry, Steven, he's pretty sure to end as Josh did."

Steven winced. "I should have thought from what they wrote me, Barbara, that Josh's vices were entirely his own. He didn't exactly contract his taste for gambling or drinking by hankering after the ways of the gentry, I should say!"

"Master Steven, poor young Josh was gay—small blame to the boy, perhaps, taking into account the bringing-up he got! There's no doubt of it," repeated Barbara, but with extreme leniency of tone, "young Josh was gay. But it wasn't that alone, nor foremost, that brought him to ruin. There's many a lad has begun as bad or worse than him, and come right enough in the end, so long as he kept himself to the condition that was good enough for his fathers before him. While Josh only kept company with young Peter Nash and the other lads about, he was no worse than the rest, but once he had fallen in with Lord Haverstock he just walked on straight and opened-eyed to perdition, Steven. French wines for dinner, brandy and stuff o' the chemists the first thing in the morning; horse-races, cock-

fighting, cards on the Sabbath evening, and a drunkard's death before he was twenty-one—that's about what lords and gentry did for Josh Lawrence?"

Steven knocked out the ashes from his pipe, and examined its bowl curiously before putting it back into his pocket. This kind of talk about lords and gentry jarred, somehow, with extraordinary harshness, upon his present state of mind.

"Lord Haverstock was in petticoats when I left, Barbara. It makes me feel my age to hear you talk of him and little Josh as grown up men. How are the other families going on; the Squire and his daughters?—the Miss Fanes, I would say."

Steven was not a coward under most circumstances, but it would have required greater courage than he possessed to tell Barbara that the Miss Fanes had known before his own people of his arrival, and that he had been with them to a London theatre; hankering already, like young Josh, after the ways and follies of the gentry!

"The Squire keeps his health, Steven, I thank you, and his lady hers, such as it is. Katharine Fane is to be married soon to Lord Petres, a poor little white-faced creature, as high as that," said old Barbara, holding her large hand out level with her waist. "Never goes about without a French valley-de-shom, and a French cook for to mince up his meats for him, but as old a family as any in England, and rich, and a papist, so Miss Katharine will have her wishes at last."

"And the other one—Dora?"

"Dora's unmarried still, and like to remain so, from all I hear. What makes you so keen to ask about the Fanes, Steven?" and Barbara looked at him suspiciously.

"What makes me ask about the Fanes?" said Steven, with a short laugh; "why, idle curiosity, I suppose; the same that made me ask about everybody else. I'll tell you what I've a much keener interest in just now than any news of lords and gentry," he added, "and that is what you can give me for dinner. I've had nothing since eight o'clock this morning, and I'm as hungry as a hawk."

The colour mounted into old Barbara's face. "If you had given me a day's notice, Steven; but—well, lad, the truth's the quickest thing to tell—I shan't have much, unless you can wait an hour or so,

to put before you. The Dawes' live in their part of the house, as you may say, and find themselves ; and I live in mine, and find myself : and I was never one, as you know, to care much for butcher's meat. I'll run off to the village, and get in your dinner for to-morrow and to-day at once, and——"

"And if I hadn't come, what would your own Sunday dinner have been, Barbara?"

"A cup of tea, and a slice of bread and butter, is as good a dinner as I want, Steven. The smell of them Dawes' baked joints, hot on the Lord's day, is always enough to set my stomach against flesh-meat. You wouldn't take a cup of tea now, sir? just to stay your hunger, as I'm obliged to keep you waiting."

"Yes, indeed, I will," said Steven, heartily, "if you will take one with me, and help you to set it, too. Are the cups kept in the same cupboard still, Barbara?"

"Oh, Master Steven!" cried the old servant, when Stephen had helped her with the kettle, and was cutting huge trenches of bread and butter, just as he used to do when he was a schoolboy; "to think that you should have come back like this! When I first seen you, dear, I thought——"

"Thought what, Barbara? Have it out."

"That you had grown to be a fine gentleman like Josh, Steenie, but you haven't."

"I haven't, indeed, Barbara," said Steven, simply. "I'm not, and never shall be, a gentleman, but I believe, unlike Josh, I am thoroughly well-contented as I am."

And then the poor fellow thought, with a sudden pang, of Katharine, and of the world that Katharine would live in, and said no more.



CHAPTER XIV.

CHURCH AND CHAPEL.

THE next day was Sunday, and the news of Steven's return having spread like wildfire from the head centre of the Plue Peter, half the female population of Broad Clithero flocked in new summer bonnets

to the village Shiloh to look at him. It was five or six minutes after service-time when he reached the chapel—the well-remembered chapel, with its weather-stained whitewashed walls, and great square windows, upon which in high and stormy tides the spray beat across the narrow road from the Channel : and Steven was conscious that a great many ribbons fluttered, a great many faces were raised above their hymn-books to give him demure looks of scrutiny, as he entered. He walked to the seat occupied by the Lawrences of old at the farther end of the chapel, a side seat, whence he faced nearly the whole of the congregation, and by the time the hymn was sung and the minister had got half way through the readings, had realized—but with a strangely blank sensation of disappointment—the life to which he had returned, and the people who were henceforth to be his associates and his equals ! There was Polly Barnes, with apple-green ribbons on her hat, sitting by her sheepish red-headed lover's side (for Polly, a churchwoman by birth, had taken openly to dissent since her engagement) ; and Miss Lyte, the minister's mature sister, in a pink and lilac bonnet ; and old Tillyer and his wife ; and Mildrum of the village shop. All the old congregation in their old seats : only with ten years more of life written on their faces, and with a whole mysterious world of difference, it seemed to Steven, between himself and them !

He sat perfectly still, wearing an edifying face of solemnity, the congregation thought, while the minister read, and with thorough and stern humility took himself to task for the disappointment, bordering close on keenest disgust, of which he was guilty. Who and what was he that he should look down upon the homely meeting-house that had been good enough for his fathers, the homely village people to whose class his father had belonged ? Was he educated ? Was he refined ? What single advantage over the others could he boast, that, after ten years of the life of a savage, he should come back and find them and their service, their unlovely chapel, and its close atmosphere, and the prospect of passing his life among them, so irrepressibly repugnant ? Were not they, in sober truth, the human creatures to whom his birth and his circumstances fitted him ? was not Katharine Fane—the unacknowledged cause of his discontent—a vision, just as far above him as the painted Virgin in the cathedral

at Mexico was above the ignorant crowds whom he used to watch and pity, as they worshipped her, kneeling, from the pavement ?

When the lessons were over came more singing, and Steven joined in it, aloud, and with as much of his heart as strenuous will could command. The hymn chosen was a quaint old "Scripture Wish," much in favour at Shiloh, of which the first verse ran thus :

" Daniel's wisdom may we know,
Jacob's wrestling spirit too.
John's divine communion feel,
Moses' meekness, Martha's zeal.
May we with young Timothy
Ev'ry sinful passion fly !"

Not very fine poetry ; but the voices of the singers were in tune, their hearts in earnest ; and fond recollections of his childhood and of the days when his mother taught him to sing this very hymn began to swell in Steven's breast, long before the five verses were sung through. After this came the prayer ; a long extempore prayer, perfectly simple, perfectly adapted to the souls of which the old minister for thirty years had had the cure, and at its close a blessing was asked openly upon Steven Lawrence's return ; an assurance given that however late an erring son might come back to his Father's house, forgiveness and peace would be in store there for him still, if he did but ask for them aright.

Steven, forgetful of the primitive habits of his denomination, had in no wise prepared himself for this kind of public ovation ; and felt more nervous than he had ever done before a Red Indian or grizzly bear in his life, when he had to stand up again and face the congregation ; nearly all of whom—the proportion of women to men in Shiloh being about five to one—showed signs of recent tears. Might he be spared in the sermon ! This was all he thought, as he kept his eyes steadfastly fixed on his book, and mechanically lifted up his voice in another hymn. Being prayed for, with the faces of the congregation hidden from him, had been ordeal enough. To be preached at, with every pair of eyes in the chapel watching to see how he took it, would be a thousandfold worse ; and he listened, with eagerness in which perhaps only a man who has been publicly offered

up in the same way can sympathize, to hear what text the minister would give out.

It was not, as his worst forebodings had predicted, any selection from the parable of the prodigal son, but a long, and as he hoped, totally inapplicable text from Nahum (chosen, doubtless, before his return had been known) commencing "She is empty, and void and waste," and continuing—for long texts were always approved of in Shiloh—to the end of the chapter. But Steven had forgotten the peculiar talent of the good old minister for applying any given portion of inspired truth to any given human exigency, when he built his hopes on such a weak foundation as seeming irrelevancy. Beginning with an exposition of the circumstances under which the inspired denunciation was given forth against sinful Nineveh, the old man, through tortuous ways, and with covert allusions that told the ears of the initiated what was coming, led his subject on to the consideration of the wastes, spiritual and moral, that occur in our own times in hearts given over to the world. He remarked upon the declension always to be traced in outward prosperity, whether of great nations or humble individuals, as habits of religion are neglected ; finally, turning round and fixing his eyes full on Stephen, he spoke, in words devoid neither of pathos nor of a certain rough eloquence, of the long-forsaken duties, of the cold hearth to which a member of his flock had newly returned. He reminded them in plainest terms of how young Joshua, "drunken with wine," had been cut off in the midst of his sins and of his life ; told of the mysterious wisdom which had guided Steven back by death and sorrow, even as it had guided the Israelites by a pillar of fire of old ; and ended with a fervent prayer that affliction might not rise up a second time in Ashcot, that he who had gone astray might prove a chosen one of God at the last, and execute the judgment of peace and truth within His gates.

If a clergyman of the Church of England were to give a like welcome to one of his flock, nine-tenths, at least, of his hearers would be wounded by the indelicacy of such public plain-speaking. But to the simple congregation of Shiloh the minister's sermon was a beautiful and a fitting one : and as Steven, with downcast face and

a sense of being horribly and altogether out of his place, sat and listened, many and earnest were the prayers sent up that he might profit by the minister's words, and become a shining light, as his grandfather (when not otherwise engaged at sea) had been before him, of the little community.

He lingered for some minutes in the chapel when the hymn succeeding the sermon was over ; his head buried in his hands, as if in prayer, almost the first hypocrisy of Steven's transparent life, and devoutly hoping that the crowd would be well dispersed by the time he left the chapel. But no such luck was in store for him. As soon as he got to the door he saw the whole congregation, from the minister downwards, standing about in groups upon the low sandy slope that separated Shiloh from the shore ; and before he had walked half a dozen steps his hands were being warmly seized, and "How d'ye do, Steven?" "How are you, Master Lawrence?" "Glad to see you back, sir!" sounded on all sides, according to the sex and age and condition of the different speakers.

Whatever asphyxia, bodily and mental, Steven had had to endure during the service, whatever indignation he had felt during the familiar personalities of the sermon, this hearty human kindness, the warmth of these friendly hand-pressures, of these honest voices, more than made up for it all. The minister, and the elders of the congregation, Mildrum of the shop, young Peter Nash with blushing little Polly at his side, all crowded round to offer him heartiest welcome and good wishes. Old labouring men, whom ten years scarcely seemed to have made older, held out their hard, work-embrowned palms to his ; small children, prompted by their mothers, stretched up their hands for his acceptance. One sturdy little chap of three, the first-born child of an old schoolmate, Steven, to the immense increase of his popularity, hoisted aloft on his strong shoulders, and carried for half a mile or more along the road ; the whole of the congregation talking, as they followed in slow procession, of the wonderful way the minister had spoke up, and the miracle it was to see Steeve Lawrence, after all his wild ways, come back a decent and a God-fearing man at the last !

About half-way between the chapel and Ashcot farm a narrow

footpath led away through shady orchards and blossoming hopfields up to the parish church, and into this path Steven turned, after bidding a friendly good-bye to such of the Shiloh people as were still in his company. The services of the church, according to country custom, were held at a later hour than those of the dissenters ; and when a long up-hill walk had brought him at last to Clithero churchyard, the rector's gentlemanly unimpassioned voice, sounding through the open windows of the church, told him that the sermon was still going on. He stood for a minute or more, his hat in his hand, to listen, then jumped across the rail that bounded the churchyard from the road, and made his way through the long, lush grass to the vault, close under the chancel window, where the Lawrences for generations past had been buried.

Clithero churchyard commands one of the fairest bird's-eye views on all that fair east coast of Kent. In the liquid noon-light Steven could trace every well-remembered landmark of his boyish years ; the marshes of Thanet, with their broad acres of tasselled reed-grass rippling in its early summer bloom ; the pale grey line of coast from the Downs to Pegwell ; the far-away Goodwin Sands (which even now he could not look at without a dozen romances of storm and wreck, and gallant life-boat rescue rising before his mind), the gauzy outline of Canterbury cathedral ; the undulating course of the distant Thames. . . . If the dead can be affected by their place of burial, surely none in England sleep sweeter than those who lie in this up-land yard ; earth, sea, and sky above and around them ; and the little Saxon church, with its quiet twelfth-century face that has seen the rising and the setting of so many forgotten beliefs, to watch their rest ! Steven stood, bareheaded still, beside the Lawrences' vault, whose inscriptions old Barbara's hands had kept free of moss or rust, and felt, with a sense of remorse for the heresy, a great deal more "in church" under this blue sky, and with pure oxygen filling his lungs, than he had done in Shiloh. When the sermon was ended came a psalm : no hymn of modern composition, but a good old Tate and Brady ; the organ deftly played, and a rich woman's voice leading the shrill trebles of the childish choir. The voice was Katharine's ; for whatever her Romish predilections, Miss Fane was still a devout

supporter openly of the Church of England ; and as he listened every pulse of the yeoman's heart was set in quickened motion. I don't know—he did not know himself—whether any hope of Katharine's having returned, and of his seeing her, had mixed with his pious desire to visit the old grave in Clithero churchyard : probably he was in a state already in which some leaven of his madness made its way into every action, every thought of his life ! All he knew was that he was standing here in the sunshine, listening to her voice and feeling himself in heaven, and that he would have been quite content if the whole remaining fifty-one verses of the paraphrase had been sung. Mercifully for the congregation, who were not lovers, but hungry agriculturists—impartial dispassionate Christians, who went to the distant church or near at hand meeting-house indifferently, and guided chiefly by weather—forty-nine of the verses were omitted. After this came the young rector's measured Oxford-trained voice again, giving benediction : then, succeeding a decent pause, could be heard the clatter of hob-nailed shoes on the stone floor ; and a minute later the old clerk pushed open the inner door of the porch, scattering, with a fierce rush, a knot of irreverent babies who were placidly making daisy-chains in the shade, and church was “out.”

Steven waited under shelter of the chancel yew until, according to the regulations of village etiquette, the whole congregation had left : first the poor people from the body of the church ; then the school children and the gentry's servants from the gallery ; then the farmers—very few of this class were church people in Clithero—and finally “the gentry” themselves ; a tall, weak-faced young man whom, from the family likeness and universal doffing of hats, Steven took to be Lord Haverstock ; after him the Squire and Dora ; and lastly Katharine with the young rector, already divested of his gown, walking at her side.

Dora Fane, Steven's senses told him, wore a bright silk and a butterfly kind of bonnet, and held a white parasol above her head. Of Katharine, all he could tell was that she looked fresher and fairer than ever in her summer dress, and that a more earnest glow than usual was on her face as she turned it and listened graciously

to the handsome young rector's talk. Here was another of her slaves he thought ; the same horrible pain rising in his breast as he had felt when he saw her with George Gordon. Peer or parson, fine London gentlemen or rough-hewn yeoman, this girl brought them all alike to her feet, and smiled upon them all ! He went back quickly, without turning to look at her again, the way that he had come across the churchyard ; and when he got into the road found the Miss Fanes and the Squire, without the rector, about a dozen yards distant to the right.

Katharine advanced towards him with an outstretched hand. "Mr. Lawrence, surely you were not in church ? I'm so glad we have met you. Dot and I only came back late last night. Papa, this is Steven Lawrence. Now, should you have recognized him ?"

"Recognized him ? Of course I should !" cried the Squire, a stout rosy little man, with wide-open good humoured eyes and three-cornered grey whiskers, much more like a yeoman, to look at, than Stephen. "The ladies talked me into believing you so altered, Lawrence, I thought I mustn't trust my own eyes when I met you, and now I see no change in you at all, except your growth. You're as like your grandfather as two peas, allowing for difference of age. How do you find the farm ? A good deal run to waste, eh ? Well, I gave you a hint through Miss Dora's letter. No eye like a master's, Lawrence, you know—no eye like a master's !"

Mr. Hilliard was shaking Steven's hand heartily all this time, and had really welcomed him out of the warmth of his heart ; but something patronizing, in his tone rather than in what he said, jarred on Katharine ; more, to speak the truth, than on Steven, who was not keenly sensitive in such matters, and indeed was thinking much more of her just then than of the Squire, or of how the Squire chose his words.

"I hope the farm won't take up so much of your thoughts that you'll have no time to come to the Dene ?" putting her hand as she said this within the Squire's arm. "You know you promised us in London that we should see a great deal of you !" and her fingers gave a little significant pressure which bade her stepfather give weight immediately to what she said.

"Yes, Lawrence, of course ;" for, like most men, the Squire was in a state of abject subjection to Katharine. "Of course we shall expect you to be a good neighbour. Now, what's to-morrow ? Monday. Well, will you come and dine with us to-morrow ? Six o'clock, and no ceremony, you know : just come as you are, and help us eat our leg of mutton, and we'll have a talk over parish matters afterwards."

Steven accepted the invitation with most unconventional readiness, and with a glow of pleasure on his handsome face, Dot having first interpolated some pleasant little insincerity of her own ; and then the Squire's carriage drove up, and Katharine gave him her hand again and her smile as they drove away, and Steven was left looking after her, with a nimbus of gold cast around Clithero churchyard, and the dusty road, and every other prosaic object of this prosaic world.

"He's a good-looking lad, that," said the Squire, as they were driving home through the lanes. "If Lawrence was a gentleman we should have a good many of the young ladies breaking their hearts about him—eh, Dot ?"

"Unfortunately, he isn't a gentleman," retorted Dot, upon whose temper four-and-twenty hours of the country were already telling. "I think Lord Haverstock, in spite of his being a lord, a much better-looking man than Steven Lawrence. Yes ; I am sincere. I can't get up these sylvan tastes, as Katharine can, at a moment's notice. I cannot appreciate men who walk about with rough brown hands and no gloves !" and Dot threw herself back into her corner of the carriage, and sighed—thinking, no doubt, of the pretty little white hands and lavender gloves of Mr. Clarendon Whyte.

Katharine's face flushed. "I think Steven Lawrence is a gentleman, papa !" she cried. "If I did not think so, I shouldn't ask him to come to our house. To my mind, he is far more refined, in his absence of all pretence, than many a man who understands every observance of what is called society, and when he comes to the Dene, I, for one, shall make him feel that I look upon him as an equal !" Here she stopped short.

"Kate," remarked the Squire, "if you want to be a friend to the young man, as no doubt you do, put all these ideas about 'gentlemen' out of your head, or at all events don't put them into his. The Law-

rences are not gentlemen in any sense of the word whatever. Old Isaac Lawrence, this lad's grandfather, used just to wear a smock-frock and live with and like his men, and I don't think Joshua Lawrence or his son took much by trying to get out of their own condition. This young Steven seems a fine, plain-spoken fellow, and I shall be glad to be a friend to him ; but if you are going to turn his head with any of your sentimental democracy, Kate, the kindest thing I could do would be to bid him never to set his foot within my doors. To go to meeting-house, associate with his equals, and work the plough with his own hands, is the way to bring round Ashcot—not playing at any new fangled nonsensical principles of equality and fraternity, with you for a playmate, Kate."

"You are thoroughly prejudiced, papa," cried Katharine, hotly. "Nothing short of all our heads being cut off will convince you, as it convinced the people of France once, that opinions *are* progressing—that ridiculous distinctions of class *are* passing away, even in this blessed weald of Kent, as everywhere else in the world !"

"The difference between you two always seems to me to be this," cried Dot, who, little burthened though she was with either sympathy or imagination, could make sharp enough hits, at times, in her judgments on better people than herself—"one plays at democracy, and is an aristocrat, heart and soul ; and the other plays at conservatism, and is a radical in practice. We'll see, at the end of three months, who is the truest friend to our ploughman protégé, Uncle Frank or you, Katharine !"

"We will see," said Katharine, but not without wincing in her heart at the prophecy Dot's words contained. "For you, Dot, I know very well Steven Lawrence, without kid gloves, as you say, and earning his bread with his own brown hands, can never be anything but Steven Lawrence, yeoman. You measure every coin by the stamp, not the metal !"

"Of course I do," said Dot. "So must any one with a grain of sense, I should say. Silver is silver everywhere, but a shilling won't pass current out of England, or a franc out of France, will it ? It seems to me, Kate, that the stamp, not the metal, is exactly what *does* make the market value of most things !"

In saying which she spoke with the most complete and unaffected sincerity. Belief in the existence of any thing or quality to whose value a market test would not apply, was an act of faith quite beyond the narrow reach of Dot's soul.



CHAPTER XV.

A STORY OF FAMILY AFFECTION.

IN the year eighteen hundred and thirty-four, more than thirty years before the date at which this story commences, two north country gentlemen, of the name of Fane, were married on the same day, at the Catholic chapel of York, to two sisters, "the young and beautiful daughters of the late Honourable John Vereker," the county newspapers recorded, when announcing the wedding. There was very little money on either side : good birth and good looks being the chief portion of the brides, a commission in the army and three or four thousand pounds each the fortunes of the Fanes ; and neither marriage turned out a particularly happy one. In less than a twelve-month Geoffrey Fane, the elder brother, was forced, by extravagance and debt, to sell out of the army ; went away with his young wife to the continent, and disappeared there. Ten or eleven years later, after a great deal of poverty and discontent, Richard, the younger one, died suddenly, leaving his widow to subsist, with her two children, upon her scanty pension and the interest of such money as the recent purchase of his majority had left out of her husband's capital.

Mrs. Richard Fane was a very pretty woman still at the time of her bereavement ; one of those pink-and-white angelic women with beseeching eyes, mild ill-health, and fragile, dimpled, helpless hands, so well suited to enact the rôle of inconsolable widowhood, and so certain not to enact it overlong ! Before Richard Fane had been eighteen months dead, the Squire of Clithero, walking about on the Scarborough beach, fell in love with this tender creature—still in weeds and a fair little daughter on either side—and, at the expiration of the conventional two years, Mrs. Fane had, to use her own

words, "secured a home and protector for her Richard's children," by becoming Mr. Hilliard's wife.

Whether Mr. Hilliard had secured his own happiness by marrying her was a problem from attempting whose solution he himself sedulously shrank to his life's end. As his wife's suffering state of health and beseeching, ill-used expression of face continued the same, she was ever, traditionally, to him a kind of domestic angel upon whom this lower world bore too hard, and whose thorny path it was his duty to smooth through submission to all those little unevennesses of mood by which angels, in domestic life, are beset. "She gave up all for me!" the poor Squire would say, with tears in his eyes, when any intimate friend got him on the subject of his household troubles; "her determination of never marrying again, the name that I know now was dearer than life itself to her heart, her religion—all! I should be a brute, by—! a brute, if I didn't bear her poor little infirmities with patience. What should I have been, sir, if I had not met with that woman? That's what I ask myself."

A much happier man, would probably have been the true answer; but such a heresy never even crossed the Squire's imagination. He was one of those commonplace men, who, with silent heroism, will bear the tyranny of a weak and selfish woman throughout their lifetime, and in their inmost hearts for ever upbraid themselves that they have not bowed their necks sufficiently low beneath the yoke! His wife's bodily feebleness, her incapacity, real or alleged, of getting into the open air except during the hottest summer weather, her querulousness, her want of reason, all appealed to the Squire's kindly heart, much as a baby's weakness appeals to a patient nurse. And then—yes, even at this present time, when they were both of them nearer fifty than any other age—he continued not a little in love with her still. She was so delicate and fragile, so foolish, so girlishly fond of dress and attention, even in her advanced middle-age, that the Squire never could realize to himself that his wife was already an old woman, and loved her, as, I think, rougher, more sterling wives at forty-eight are seldom loved. "No man will ever care for me as papa does for you, mother," Katharine would say: "I am too strong, and large, and well able to take care of myself, ever to be made an

idol of !" And Mrs. Hilliard, with a little sigh, would take the remark quite as a matter of course : then bid her daughter be thankful that she was as she was. Excessive beauty, excessive attraction, did not bring happiness to their possessors, "or why should I, Kate, have had your dear, dear father, and my rank in life, and religion, and everything else, taken from me, and now spend the life of suffering that I do ?" That she had been very discontented in the poverty of her first marriage, and was extremely comfortable in the luxury of her second one, were the facts of the case ; but Mrs. Hilliard lived in a sentimental ideal world—with a population of one—from whence facts were rigorously excluded. And even Katharine, with all her stout common sense, could never, in her childish days, at least, feel sure that her pleasant home at the Dene, and her garden, and her pony, and the Squire's affection, were not good things that had been purchased for her at the terrible price of her mother's martyrdom.

Dora's appearance on the scene did not occur until about a year and a half after Mrs. Hilliard's second marriage. Up to this time the Squire had always believed his wife to be an only daughter, and it was by purest accident, and from an alien source, that he abruptly discovered at last that there had been another sister, married also to a Fane, and the mother of one child. On cross-examination, Mrs. Hilliard confessed that she been accustomed to write to the Geoffrey Fanes during the early years of her first marriage, but that, somehow or another, the correspondence had been allowed latterly to drop. In the last letter she ever received from them, more than seven years ago, Geoffrey himself was said to be dying in Paris ; his wife in failing health ; and every shilling of their money spent. "And I sent them twenty pounds, Mr. Hilliard," she added, "little as my Richard and I could afford it, and for *your* sake, and to spare *your* feelings, have never spoken of poor dear Theodosia since I married you."

"And the child ?" cried the Squire, looking for once with indignation, bordering on disgust, at his wife's calm-and-white face. "Eight and seven—God bless my soul ! if the girl lives she must be fifteen. What will have become of her in these years, if both of her parents are dead ?"

Mrs. Hilliard answered hysterically, that she was sure she didn't know; and it was very cruel, in her weak state, to call up such dreadful images of her own flesh and blood. If Mr. Hilliard had the slightest delicacy of feeling, he would know what it must cost any one of her sensitive nature to imagine, even, that a sister or a sister's child could want! If she had thought such bitter things would have been said, she was sure she never would have mentioned her poor Theodosia's name to him at all:—then to her room and sal-volatile.

The next morning the Squire packed up his portmanteau, and started off alone to Dover, speculating, somewhat, on the journey as to whether sainted invalids have much feeling for aught besides themselves or not. He had a good deal of work to do in Paris before he could find the faintest clue to Geoffrey Fane or his family; but English gold, liberally spent, and assistance from the police, brought him, after four days, on the right track. Geoffrey Fane died on a fifth floor in the Boulevard de l'Hôpital about seven years ago; his wife had only survived him by a twelvemonth; and his child was, or had been till lately, the apprentice of a woman living Rue Mouffetard, 57, and fripièremodiste (half pawnbroker, half milliner, that is to say) by trade.

With forebodings of he knew not what: with a heavier sense of shame than any that in his whole upright life he had known before, the Squire took a fiacre, within five minutes after receiving tidings of his wife's niece, and drove, through quarters of Paris into which the "walks" of Galignani had never brought him before, to the Rue Mouffetard—the principal street of that singular twelfth arrondissement which borders the Bièvre, and where washing, bleaching, and tanning are the exclusive occupations of the community. He stopped, as he had been directed, at Number 57, and discharged the fiacre. "Madame Mauprat?" said a little old woman, who was tottering under a hideous pyramid of untanned skins into the courtyard; the Squire having three times repeated the name before his English pronunciation rendered it intelligible. "Yes, yes. Madame Mauprat lived on the entresol, of course. Par là, mon petit Monsieur, montez, montez!" So the Squire groped his way to a dirty, very nearly dark staircase; mounted; and on the stage of the entre-

sol rang a bell, which he guessed, for it was too dark to read if any name was written there, might belong to Madame Mauprat.

It was answered by a child apparently of about eleven years old ; a thin, dark-eyed child, exquisitely neat, in an old black alpaca frock, with gilt earrings in her ears, a ring on her hand, fair hair taken back à la Chinoise from her face, and a little cap on the back of her head. She gave him a curtsey and a smile ; the Squire caught an expression like little Kate's at home about her lips, and his heart beat thick.

"What is your name, my dear ?" he said, in English. "Don't be afraid ; I've come here to be your friend."

The child made him another curtsey, or rather another series of bows and smiles and curtsies, and begged him, in French, to give himself the trouble to enter. "Anglais, no—var leetle !" she added, turning round, and looking like Kate again as the Squire followed her into a little shop, with caps and bonnets on a tiny round table and a rose-tree and bird-cage in the apology for a window. "Donnez vous la peine de vous asseoir, M'sieur. La patronne va rentrer tout de suite—de tree minute—M'sieur comprends ?"

So the poor Squire found himself thrown upon his French, entirely composed of substantives—"oui," "non," and "avez-vous"—and in this language proceeded to ask her questions. "Avez-vous père and mère ? Anglais ? Mort ? Argent ? Beef and Moutong ?" assisting his little hearer's comprehension of each question by such pantomimic show of taking out a gold piece and holding it to her, pretending to eat and drink, et cetera, as seemed to him best suited to her tender years and capacity.

With thorough self-possession, and with more and more smiles : for his gold watch-chain and gold pieces, and the nation to which he belonged, were facts perfectly intelligible to her, whatever his French was : the child stood before him and gave her answers. Her father and mother were dead, more years ago than she could tell. They were English, both of them, and had died here in Paris. She had lived with the patronne ever since. Money ? Eh, mon dieu, M'sieur—with a shrug of her small shoulders—not too much of that. And beef and mutton ? Yes, on a Sunday, sometimes. And amusement—pleasure ? . . . Ah, M'sieur would say distractions ! Oh, for that—

yes ! There were the balls of the Barreaux Verts, and the concerts at the Petit Bicêtre ; and once she had been to Asnières ; and once — with conscious pride this—to Mabilles ! M'sieur was English ? M'sieur did not inhabit Paris ?—looking at him with pity. Ah ? M'sieur would not be acquainted, then, with the places where she found her distractions, even if she were to name them.

The Squire looked at the little creature, as she babbled on, with a pity for which I can find no name. He was not at all a philosopher. It would never have occurred to him that the life of a milliner's apprentice in one of the poorest quarters of Paris : making up caps of six sous each, and dancing among the washing-girls at the Sunday balls : might be a life out of which some human creatures could get a good deal of enjoyment. For a girl of English birth, the daughter of an English gentleman, the cousin of little Kate at home, to have spent her childhood among vile, immoral French people (everything not English was vile and immoral to the Squire), was desecration that made his blood boil as he thought of it. And when the "patronne" herself entered, some minutes later, nothing but the impossibility of being abusive without adjectives withheld him from giving his opinion of her, and of the rest of her country-women, on the spot.

Madame Mauprat was a stout, well-featured woman of about fifty, Norman, not Parisian, by birth, and with something of country frankness still discernible in her speech and manner. Monsieur's business ? Ah, ha ! Monsieur wished information about the little Bébé. And how was she to tell then—no offence—that Monsieur's intentions were frank, and that it would be her duty to answer him ?

"Argent," answered the Squire, laconically. "Argent Anglais," chinking the money in his pockets. "Vous parly, and I pay."

In all his continental travels, experience had taught him that this was a short but infallible road to the foreign conscience ; and Madame Mauprat proved no exception to the general rule. Her quick Norman instinct for scenting a bargain made her grasp in a second every detail of the situation. The Bébé's English relatives had found her out at last, and wanted to purchase her. Now the thing was to raise the value of the article in demand to the uttermost. She put her arm round Bébé's shoulder—the girl opening great eyes at such

a demonstration—drew her to her side ; and without more than the necessary arabesque of falsehood told her story. In 1841, Madame Mauprat had had a lodging in a house on the Boulevard de l'Hôpital, a poor fifth floor, of which an Englishman with his wife and child shared half. The man died ; and the widow, with such money as she possessed, a miserable five hundred francs ! entered into business as modiste—fripière-modiste, Madame Mauprat pretended to be no higher in the world than she was—with her neighbour. "And a bad bargain was struck for me that day, Monsieur," added the woman, shaking her head at the recollection. Madame Veine—that was the English lady's name ? the Squire nodded ; could neither work nor mind the business ; could do nothing, in short, but to take to her bed and weep. Monsieur might figure to himself how prettily a long illness would eat up the profits of a poor little commerce like hers ! Well, at the end of a year, Madame Veine died, leaving her to pay the expenses of the doctor and the funeral, and with this fillette that Monsieur saw—this Bébé—on her hands ! What to do ? The child was an expense and no profit ; too small to work—look at her now, fifteen years old, and a little doll, an atom, a Bébé as she was ! but what will you ? Madame Mauprat had the heart of a mother, and couldn't give her up, as her friends advised, to the police. Since that time Bébé had eaten of her bread, and shared her room, and been to her as her own child. And Mauprat raised a corner of her shawl to her eyes, and wept.

"Combieng ?" said the Squire, with a face of parchment.

"Monsieur !" sobbed the Frenchwoman.

"Combieng ?" repeated Mr. Hilliard. "Le petit fill pour Moi. Combieng ?"

Madame Mauprat became indignant ; the Squire spoke of the police ; finally, the child herself was appealed to. She put a little thin hand at once into her new protector's, and said that she would go with him ; and after this the "patronne" had nothing to do but make as good a money bargain for herself as possible. The Squire paid down his English gold with royal liberality. "After all," said he to himself, "the woman may have saved the child from the foundling hospital ;" and in half an hour's time Bébé, or rather Dora Fane,

was seated by his side in a fiacre, and driving with him through the tortuous streets of the Faubourg St. Marceau towards the distant Rue de Rivoli, where he lodged. There was no doubt whatever as to the child's identity. The Geoffrey Fanes had lived in Paris at the time of her birth : and her certificate of baptism, a few old letters, and a note-book of her father's, had all been sold, one by one, by Mauprat to the Squire. This little work-girl, in her white cap, and with her ideas and manners of the twelfth arrondissement, was the treasure that he had brought up from the lowest social strata of Parisian life to be the acknowledged niece of his high-bred wife, the daily companion of Bella and little Kate at home.

The poor Squire was simply and literally too much afraid of his own work to take the child back to England at once ; so wrote a preparatory letter to Mrs. Hilliard first ; then spent two or three days in Paris alone with little Dora. Before they had been six hours together a great deal of the child's English, disused rather than forgotten, began to return to her, and coming to the help of the Squire's French, enabled them to understand each other admirably—under no circumstances, perhaps, would a man with a heart like Mr. Hilliard's, and a pocket full of money, find it very hard to make a child understand him ! The first thing to be done, he thought, after returning to the hotel, ordering a room for her, and writing his English letter, was to give her some beef and mutton. So taking her hand, he walked her off to the Palais Royal—it was about five o'clock of a summer's afternoon—and ordered a dinner at the restaurant of the Trois Frères. A dinner suited to Ma'mselle, he told the waiter ; plain roast meat, and plenty of sweets and fruits, and all the things a child of her age would like. You may believe how Dora, who had never tasted anything more dainty than galette and cherry compote in her life, and who had only eaten a plate of water-soup that day, enjoyed herself. The roast meat she would not look at ; but vegetables, hors-d'œuvres of all sorts, marrons-glacés, ices, creams—all of these the little famished creature ate greedily, and at last, when she could absolutely do no more in the way of present consumption, waited till the garçon who was serving their table had turned his back, then plunged both her hands into a dish

of candid fruits, and began briskly to fill her pockets, with a *faç* and air of quiet unconcern that tickled the Squire's fancy immensely.

This was Dora's first experience of the sweetness of riches. When they had left the restaurant they walked, hand in hand, about the colonnades; the Squire quite unconscious of the singular discrepancy in their appearance, and the smiles and remarks that were freely bestowed on them by the crowd; and after a time the child was told that she might buy any little trinket she liked for her own. She was modest as yet; could not, in fact, realize the enormous wealth of her new protector; so walked him up to an open stall, where "*Imitation*" was written in black and yellow letters a foot long, and chose a pinchbeck locket of three francs. Next morning she proposed a visit to the Palais Royal again; stopped before a window "*en Or*," got the Squire inside, and was seized with violent admiration for a tiny doll's watch of one hundred and forty francs. Mr. Hilliard gave it her; and then there must be a chain to hang it from; and then there was a brooch, and a ring—"Ah, but a ring, *m'sieur*, that would go so well on my small finger!" And then the Squire, beginning to see of what materials his new-found treasure was made, got out of the shop and out of the Palais Royal as quick as his legs would carry him.

This was on Saturday: they were to leave Paris early on Monday morning; and Dora conveyed to her friend, her uncle, as she already called him, that it would be proper for her to have some new clothes, a pretty dress, and a jacket, and a bonnet—how her heart throbbed at the thought! above all, a bonnet to appear in on Sunday. These, of course, were matters respecting which the Squire was powerless in the child's hands. "*Not too dear*," was all he said, as they stopped at the different shops on the Boulevard; and "*not too de-are*!" Dora always replied, with a wise shake of her head; then went in and bought exactly what dress, bonnet, gloves, and parasol suited her fancy.

On Sunday afternoon it must really have been a picture to see the two sally forth for a walk in the Champs Elysées. The portly little Squire with his English frock-coat and light waistcoat, and close-shorn English face, Dora in a silk robe, worn long to the ground for the first time in her life, cream-coloured gloves, white parasol, tiny

pink bonnet, and the airs and graces of a Parisienne of thirty ! She walked along in a sort of ecstasy, barely feeling that her feet trod on solid earth through the Champs Elysées, and just as they were reaching the Bois de Boulogne her cup of joy was filled to the last drop of overflowing : two of the washing-girls of her old quartier, walking with their sweethearts in blouses, passed ; then turned round and gazed at her ! She looked with sublime unconcern at the string of carriages in the road, as though all acquaintances of hers must be *there*, not in the footpath, and realized how utterly she had done with her old life and all the people belonging to it. It seemed a hundred years since Thursday night, when these very girls, out of their scanty savings, had given her a ticket, and taken her with them to the gallery of the Ambigu. How delicious to think that they would go home and tell Hortense and Delphine and the rest that they had seen the little Bébé in a silk robe and a bonnet, and walking with a gentleman, and too grand—oh, much too grand and fine a lady to speak to *them* !

After their walk they had dinner at one of the summer restaurants of the Bois de Boulogne, and as they were sitting at dessert the Squire asked the child what she would like to do to finish the day ? He knew that a girl of her age, brought up in Paris, would have no idea of Sunday save as a day of amusement ; “and if I never commit a greater sin,” thought he, “than letting her have a boat on the lake or a ride in a merry-go-round on her last day in Paris, my conscience will be a white one !” And so he put the question to her.

“Amusement ? somezing give me plaizir ?” said Dora, repeating his words after him. “Ah, que, m’sieur, est bon ! We will go——” Her heart cried to one of the balls of the Barreaux Verts, to look on, too grand to dance (except perhaps with young Oliver, the butcher of the faubourg), and eclipsing Hortense and Delphine, and the whole world she knew, with her dress and her watch, and her general aristocracy of appearance. This was her first impulse ; then she looked wistfully at the Squire, shook her head with an instinctive feeling that a ball in the twelfth arrondissement would not perhaps be quite the place for him, and said boldly, “To Mabille !”

The Squire jumped up from his chair with horror.

"Mais, mon Dieu, nous sommes très très bien !" cried Dora, thinking he might be too modest, perhaps, to present himself in such high society. "Zay refuse—no ! zay admit us—yes !"

"Admit us !" said the Squire ; "yes, I suppose they would ! Me at Mabilles—on a Sunday ! Come away, come away, child !" And Dora was walked back to the hotel ; and after a long sermon from the Squire, went to her bed that night with a sense of a new wide gulf between her and him, and a dim idea that she had better never tell the truth on any subject whatsoever as soon as she found herself among her rich relations in England.

Stunted in her moral as in her physical growth, the poor little creature had really, up to the age of fifteen, continued shielded, by her very incapacity, from the knowledge of evil as of good. A robust, more loving nature would probably in these early years have contracted far more positive harm than had Dora's. She had liked going to the balls of the *barrière*, not for any notice that was ever taken there of her own meagre little face, but for the sake of looking at the *toilettes*, most of them furnished by her own *patronne*, of the washing-girls ; or of sitting in a corner apart from the crowd, with some other child of her own size, and "making believe" that they were grand ladies in long silk dresses, with a carriage and livery servants to conduct them home. Had liked standing tiptoes in the galleries of the cheap theatres, when any one would treat her to a place there, not, as more highly-endowed children of her age will do, dreaming premature dreams of love or romance, and seeing herself in the beautiful princess, or weeping *Aventurine*, with Prince Charming, and all the other handsome lovers at her feet ! Love and romance were things of which not the faintest whisper had entered the child's prosaic life. At the balls of the *barrière* she had amused herself with admiring the poor bits of finery of the washing-girls. At the theatre her pleasure had consisted in watching the dresses of the actresses, or of the ladies far down below in their boxes ; wondering what they could have cost ; speculating how she one day would dress if any turn of luck, such as befalls poor orphan girls on the stage, should find her with full pockets ! Dress to this little child of Paris

was the sum of human existence: theatres and balls, and the Boulevards on a Sunday, were places to show it in; and every effort, every sacrifice of life, means wherewith to buy it. She had never seen very much of virtue; she had never heard anything at all of vice. Some ladies had to wear high-up cotton dresses; and others—on the stage, and in the lower boxes—were in such a state of beatitude as to possess shining silks, and necklaces, and to show their bare shoulders. She hoped when she was a woman she would be like these latter ones; and not, at all events, marry a working-man, a tanner, or rag-collector, as she had known some of her friends do, and live for ever in a miserable room, with dirty children, and kicks from her husband's sabots whenever she tried to go abroad for her pleasure! This was about the extent of Dora's social generalizations. The Squire, too simple of heart, too narrow of mind, to have any save the most literal black-and-white ideas of right, had been absolutely staggered, thrown out of all his bearings of morality, by the girl's unblushing proposal of Mabelle on the Sabbath; and so at once laid the foundation of her whole future deterioration of character—hypocrisy!

"Say as little as you possibly can about Paris, my poor child," was the burthen of all his advice to her during their journey home. "Your aunt is a very pious woman, and your cousins must never hear the name of—of such places as you mentioned on Sunday!"

And the child, nodding her small head, and looking wise, told him always he need not fear. "Bals de la barrière—no! Theatres, no! Mabelle—no, no, no!" The climax with a burst of virtuous warmth highly satisfactory to the Squire in this his first attempt at moral training.

The five minutes succeeding the arrival of the travellers at the Dene were minutes never to fade from Dora's recollection while she lived. The poor little girl had not been used to much kindness! of love she knew not the meaning; but she had been accustomed, at least, to the bonhomme of manner which French people, of all classes and professions, show towards children; and when the companionship of the kindly Squire was suddenly exchanged for the presence of Mrs. Hilliard and her eldest daughter, whatever heart there was

in the child's small breast froze up at once, and, as far as they were concerned, for ever. Mrs. Hilliard, unapproachably stately in her soft laces, and invalid shawl, and easy chair, just touched her niece's cheek with her lips, then remarked—with a look at the Squire, that made him feel himself an impostor, and Dot the result of some iniquitous conspiracy—that the child was not in the least like either of her parents, and put her handkerchief over her eyes. Arabella, a tall womanly girl of her age, shook her cousin's hand coldly ; looked at her from head to foot ; then, turning to her stepfather, asked him what sort of bonnets were worn in Paris ?

"Bonnets ? why, such as you see on Dora, of course," said the Squire, putting his arm kindly round the stranger's thin shoulders. "When Dora and I walked out on Sunday, we thought ourselves the two best-dressed people in the *Champs Elysees*, didn't we, Dora ? Where's Kate ?" ringing the bell. "I want Kate to come and give a kiss to her Paris cousin."

And then the door opened, and whatever brightness, whatever love, Dora Fane's life was destined to know, came in.

Katharine was at this time a fine-grown handsome child of eight, nearly as tall as Dora, more than her equal in weight, and with a baby's innocence upon her beautiful mouth and in her eyes. She rushed up to the Squire, covered his down-bent face with kisses, then turned and looked steadily at her new cousin. She had been told of a girl the same age as Arabella ; and to a little child of eight a girl of fifteen is a woman ; so seeing a creature of her own height, but in a long silk dress, and with an old unsmiling face, she shrank back, and caught tight hold of her stepfather's hand.

"Why—what a dot !" she cried ; honestly, but not in a complimentary voice.

"Kate," said the Squire, gravely, "this child has neither father nor mother, nor friend save us. Will you love her ?"

Katharine stood irresolute for a second ; then the forlorn new cousin tried to smile—holding out her hand, and looking frightened—and in another moment a pair of warm white arms were round her neck. "I do love you !" cried Katharine ; "and I am glad you're so small. You shall be my friend, not Bell's. Don't think

you've no one to care for you, though you are such a dot—you'll have me !"

This was how from the first Dora came to be called "Dot;" and this, as I have said, was the beginning of the solitary affection destined ever to shine upon the little creature's life.

In a week, Kate had made the Squire give Dot a garden of her own, and a fishing-rod, and a setter pup; possessions, the child thought, to raise any human creature to the highest pinnacle of happiness. In a week, the pink Paris bonnet and white parasol were unceremoniously appropriated by Arabella, the beautiful silk dress confiscated by Mrs. Hilliard's orders; and the little work-girl of the Faubourg Saint Marceau, with bitterest disappointment, had begun to realize what kind of life this was to which her fate had brought her.

She hated it with a hate that every year of her life only tended to strengthen. Not alone the city habits of her childhood, but her naturally weak and fragile organization, withheld her from ever entering with pleasure upon the hardy out-of-door life of little Kate and the Squire. She could not learn to ride: she hated fishing, got sick and tired before she had walked through half a turnip-field. All the excitement, all the healthy animal enjoyment of country life, was, perforce, a sealed book to her; and as nearly the whole of Kate's afternoons, winter and summer, were spent outside the house, long and dreary were the hours in which Dora had to sit at her needle by herself and dream of the old life—sweet in spite of its hard work and privations—from which she had been taken. She never, from the day on which she entered the Squire's house until she finally left it in white silk and orange blossoms, had one act of positive unkindness to complain of. Mrs. Hilliard, from the first, looked upon the unexpected discovery of her pauper niece as "her cross," and treated the girl always with outward consideration, yet with a smothered kind of meek malignity that Dot was quite sharp enough to feel and return with compound interest. The eldest Miss Fane simply ignored her. "I never knew my poor Aunt Theodosia," she would say, "and, of course, I cannot be expected to feel much interest in her daughter. It was very good of dear papa to act as he did; and I am sure I hope in time poor Dora will settle respectably. It will be no advantage

to Kate, having a girl of her disposition for a companion in the house as she grows up." And so, between the mother and daughter, Dora, in these first years, came to occupy a place higher than the lady's maid, certainly, because she dined at table, but more fatally dull, more bereft of anything like healthy human interest in life, than that of the lowest servant in the Squire's household.

These were the days of her early flirtation with Steven—these were the days of young Hoskins, the surgeon, and of Mr. Smith, the curate. Detesting the country, detesting her life at home, shut out by natural incapacity from study of anything deeper than the fashion-books, what was Dot, now eighteen years of age, to do but make up little bits of furtive finery in her own room, and try their effects on the different young men of the neighbourhood whenever she had a chance of meeting them in her walks? Arabella Fane, on the eve of marrying old General Dering's three thousand a year, solemnly warned the girl once about the growing and deplorable frivolity of her character; and Dot's retort established for life the dislike that had only smouldered hitherto between herself and her cousin. "I don't pretend to be anything but frivolous," she said. "I have as you say, no interests, no serious occupations; and then, Arabella, you know, you have given me no opportunity of meeting rich old generals! If I had had the chance—*va!* do you think I would not have sacrificed inclination to principle just as readily as you, my cousin?"

She had no chance of meeting rich old generals; and somehow, in spite of the Squire's declared intention of giving her a thousand pounds on her wedding-day, none of the young men in the neighbourhood seemed destined to do more than flirt with Dora. Steven Lawrence ran away to California; Mr. Smith went over to Rome; young Hoskins got into a dispensary practice and married his cousin at Dorking; and Dora Fane was Dora Fane still. She grew up, as much as she was destined ever to grow: began to feel old, began to look old: and still no prospect dawned of her leaving her prison-house, as in her heart she always called the Dene. Then came Katharine's eighteenth birthday, her introduction into the world, her brilliant first season in London; finally, her engagement to

Lord Petres, and all poor Dora's colourless, hopeless life was changed.

"If people want to be civil to me, they shall be civil to Dot," Katharine would say, stoutly. "If Bella wants me to stay with her, she shall ask Dot too. We have forgotten too long, I think, all of us, that the poor little thing may have a few vanities, a few desires for amusement in life, like ourselves!"

And Mrs. Dering, too good a woman to be uncharitable when the wishes of an embryo peeress were concerned, had not only invited Dora to her house, but, in a certain cold and duty-like fashion, had done what she could towards assisting the first start of her penniless cousin in the world of London. A present of three silk dresses, in whatever colour the penniless cousin chose, but not costing more than six shillings and sixpence a yard; an introduction to the least valuable of her own partners: and a set of garnet ornaments: with all these benefactions (in addition to the attic up among the servants in Hertford Street) had Mrs. Dering loaded Dora; bearing, as she said, no malice respecting things past, in her heart.

"And so, whatever the future brings, Kate," she would reflect, "we shall always have the satisfaction of knowing that we have performed our duty. Principles, right feeling, no human creature can instil into another; but as much as it is permitted us to do, our family has done for Dora. Now, if we could only help her into making a suitable marriage!"

Which remark brings me back, with nice precision, to the present point of my story. To render Dora Fane's character intelligible, I have been forced, thus far, to digress. All that concerns her for the future will be written on the same blotted page that bears the record of poor Steven's life!



CHAPTER XVI.

THE SQUIRE BECOMES SHARP-SIGHTED.

"YES; these things bring history home to ourselves," said Mrs. Hilliard, shutting up her third volume. "I realize, as I never did before, what the poor dear French noblesse must have gone through

...their property confiscated, not knowing from day to day whether their heads were safe on their shoulders, and with morality, religion, the very days of the week, you may say, turned upside down by paganism and the republic . . . just as England is being turned upside down by these strikes and monster meetings and democratic opinions now ! You may laugh, Katharine, but it is so ; and having the lower classes to one's table is a tremendous stride—a tremendous stride," repeated Mrs. Hilliard, with more energy than correctness of metaphor, "against every principle in which one was reared. To dance at a ball with tenantry, or even the men-servants, is nothing—Dossy and I used to do it (in high dresses, of course), every Christmas, in my father's house ; but dinner—a man of this Steven Lawrence's condition to dinner !"

Too really weak in health for any active employment in life, and with a mental digestion too torpid, or too vitiated, for the assimilation of any robust nourishment, Mrs. Hilliard consumed the ordinary three volume novel to a simply incalculable extent. "Passed her life in the pursuit of literature," she was accustomed to say of herself. And her ideas—if I may call them ideas—were apt to take whatever feeble colouring they possessed from the tone of the nine hundred pages which her fingers had been turning over between breakfast and dinner. The hero and heroine of to-day happening to have lost their heads on the scaffold in '92, poor Mrs. Hilliard was all in a flutter of indignant agitation at the idea of this *sans culotte*—this son of the people, Steven Lawrence—being asked to dine at her table. She had put a quantity of rich old lace about her handsome shoulders, had braided her soft hair plainly from her forehead—as the dear Marquise de Videccour, the heroine's mother, did on the morning when her ruffianly executioners bore her to the scaffold—and now sat on her luxurious invalid sofa before the fire, waiting for her six o'clock dinner with quiet resignation, and feeling how like one of the beautiful martyred patricians of the Revolution she must look.

Katharine came from the open window where she had been standing, a book in her hand, but her eyes fixed in reality upon the distant road which led from Ashcot to the Dene, and knelt down by her mother's side. "Dear mamma," kissing Mrs. Hilliard's delicate

hand, "how romantic you always insist upon being about everything ! Steven Lawrence is going to dine here, and talk to papa about man-gels and second crops, and the injustice of dissenters paying church rates, and you build up a whole revolutionary romance—the guillotine in full force on the necks of dukes and duchesses, and Steven Lawrence for their headsman—on the spot ! Confess, mamma, you have been reading some story to-day about the French Revolution ? Now, I know you have !"

"Katharine," said Mrs. Hilliard, giving her third volume a little unseen push beneath the sofa cushion, "when I was a girl it was the fashion to store young women's minds—to *store* them, Kate—with sound fixed ideas on all subjects ; moral, religious, and political. There is no need of the flimsy literature of the day to rub up my memory in history. I know the French Revolution as well as my catechism : Robespierre, Danton, the Marquise de Videcœur—no, I'm not sure whether she *was* historical, but at all events, Kate, I know perfectly well what I am talking of."

"Of course you do, dear mamma, so far as history goes ; only, why apply it all to Steven Lawrence ? He is very humble, poor fellow—we saw a little of him in London, you know—does not in the least try to set himself above what he is, and . . . oh, mamma !" cried Katharine, "be nice to him, as you, and you only, can be when you choose !"

"And why, Katharine, pray ?" for her recollections of the French Revolution were not so vivid as to have dislodged from Mrs. Hilliard's mind the story of modern English life she read yesterday, in which a simple young country lady had married, then murdered, her head-gardener. "Why are *you* so anxious about the reception this Steven Lawrence is to receive ?"

"In the first place, because he is to be our guest, mamma. In the second, because—well, because he will be, ever so little, perhaps, out of his place."

"Anything more, Kate ?"

"No, that is—mother !" cried Katharine, suddenly, looking up into Mrs. Hilliard's rose-and-white foolish face : "I wonder whether I can trust you with a secret of mine ?"

Mrs. Hilliard raised one white hand to her forehead. "Please go on, Katharine. I *believe* I can bear anything. Tell me all—and quick!" said the poor lady, falling back upon one of the favourite phrases of her heroines: "Anything but suspense!"

"Oh, don't expect too much, mamma. It's all very silly, I believe—an idea Bella and I have taken up; but we think . . . well, we think Steven Lawrence may have intentions about Dot, and *that*, perhaps, everything considered, we ought to try to help matters on."

"Intentions! about Dot!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, opening her eyes wide in a moment. "What! of marrying her? Oh, dear me! and her grandfather a Vereker, and her birth equal to yours and Bella's!—it must be, of course, for we are all married brothers and sisters—no, I don't mean that—but you have told me so suddenly, Kate, my mind is quite upset. However, I'll not go in to dinner. *That* humiliation, at least, it is in my power to save myself. My sister's orphan girl—oh, Dossy, Dossy!"

"Mamma," said Katharine, not without impatience, "if Dossy—if my aunt Theodosia—were alive, I don't think she would be disgraced by seeing Dot married to a man like Steven Lawrence. Dot is not quite so young as she once was, and—well, I don't mind saying it between you and me—poor little Dot has not had many offers of marriage, and I don't think has enough resources in herself to be happy as a single woman. If Mr. Lawrence really should care for her, mamma, I think you will be acting very unwisely, indeed, to discourage him."

"I discourage him!" cried Mrs. Hilliard. "Oh, Kate, how like Mr. Hilliard you are when you argue! what different, what generous tempers I was accustomed to once! I discourage Dora's suitors, when for fifteen years I have worn myself out with the poor girl's infirmities and—and the efforts I have made to be a mother to her! No man with a spark of delicate feeling," said Mrs. Hilliard, with tears rising in her meek blue eyes, "no man with the faintest delicacy or consideration for his wife's happiness would have acted as Mr. Hilliard did in first bringing her here! But, of course, when a wife has once made such sacrifices as I did for her husband—and a second husband, too!—he will never know where to stop in his de-

mands. I don't suppose another woman in this country would have behaved as I did when Mr. Hilliard first brought Dora from Paris. A pink silk bonnet and white parasol—of course, you are too young to remember—and the religious principles of a Hottentot, to associate with my Richard's children!"

"Dear mamma, what harm did she do us?" said Katharine, too much accustomed to her mother's peculiar modes of logic to attempt to argue. "From the time she entered the house till now Dot seems to me to have been simply and entirely negative. A poor little creature, not very much pleasure, perhaps, to herself or to any one else, but harmless, thoroughly."

"Of course, Kate. That is just what Mr. Hilliard says. It's very easy for those who are in strong health, and who spend their lives out of doors, to use such words as 'harmless' and 'negative.' To an invalid nothing can be negative. If people are not sympathetic to me they are positively repulsive; and Dora is not sympathetic. Dora is anything but sympathetic, Kate, as you know. I detest frivolity."

"I know that as a rule all the people you like are worthy of being liked," replied Katharine, diplomatically, "and this makes me feel sure you will be pleased with Steven Lawrence. He is bright and simplehearted, mamma; quite diffident of himself, and full of fine natural good feeling; so putting aside all this about Dot—which, of course, is mere foolish talk of mine—you *will* be gracious to the poor fellow when he comes, won't you?"

"Have you ever known me anything but gracious to persons of a lower rank to our own, Katharine?" said Mrs. Hilliard, reverting once more to the tone of the Marquise de Videcœur. "It may give me pain, infinite pain, to feel that Mr. Hilliard should have placed me in such a false position, but I shall treat the young man himself precisely as I would treat Lord Haverstock at my own table. No-*blesse oblige*, Kate!"

So when, a quarter of an hour later, Steven Lawrence entered, he received a softly courteous greeting, a kindly smile from Katharine's mother that almost made him as much her slave as he already was her daughter's! The excessive feminine sweetness of the elder

lady's face ; her weakness, her pallor, her slow, languid voice, her white languid hands, all redoubled in Steven's heart the sense that Katharine Fane had newly taught him of perfect refinement, of perfect womanly grace. As a boy he remembered having occasional glimpses of the "Squire's lady," fair and languid-voiced and helpless then, as now ; and the thought of all the patient suffering which this gentle being must have passed through since, appealed to him as the thought of pain and weakness in others is wont to appeal to men of unbroken health and active out-of-door habits themselves. With the Squire talking to him, and Dot going through pretty attitudes with the parouquet by the window (for his benefit) ; nay, with Katharine herself at his side, he could not keep his attention from the invalid's fragile face ; and when dinner was announced, quite unconscious of what was, or was not, etiquette for a man in his position to do, walked quickly to her sofa, and stooping down, held out his arm for her hand to rest upon as she rose.

"That is right, Lawrence," said the Squire. "Do you take in Mrs. Hilliard, and Dora, you must be content with me. I'm sorry for you, Kate," as Katharine, radiant at seeing her mother's gracious reception of Steven, put her hand under his other arm ; "but even Kate Fane must come down from her pedestal sometimes ! If I had thought of it I might have asked the handsome young rector for you, though—poor Kate !"

"I'm very glad you did not, papa," said Katharine. "We are a much pleasanter party by ourselves, in my opinion !" And Steven's heart caught her answer, and thrilled with a perfectly unwarrantable and ridiculous sense of relief ! He had been lying awake half the night thinking, in jealous misery, of the handsome rector, and of how Katharine had smiled on him as they walked together out of church.

"You will find us all very much changed, Mr. Lawrence," said Mrs. Hilliard, as leaning on Steven's arm, she walked slowly with him to the dining-room. "The children grown into women, the Squire and I, alas ! into old people."

"Old ?" said Steven, looking down at her with his frank blue eyes. "That's not a word I should have thought of in connection with you."

I may be stupid, but it seems to me, madam, yours is a face that never could grow old."

Here he stopped, afraid he had been over bold; and Mrs. Hilliard remembered Ninon de l'Enclos, for whose smiles a third generation duelled when she was sixty, and let her soft white hand rest closer on the young man's arm.

She bade him sit beside her at table: Katharine opposite to him; and speedily forgetting the wounded pride of Videcœur in the flattered vanity of Ninon, chattered in her prettiest, most sentimental strain (a strain that thirty years before had, doubtless, suited a girlish peach-blossom face well enough) during the whole of dinner.

"We were to have talked over parish matters, I believe, Lawrence," said Mr. Hilliard, when the dessert was put upon the table, and they had moved away into the bay window; for in spring-time the dining room was the pleasantest evening-room at the Dene, and the ladies always stayed there while the Squire drank his coffee after dinner: "but I have not been able to get a word in with you yet. How do you find the farm looking? not quite as it used in the old days, I suppose."

"The farm," answered Steven, "is looking as any farm must look upon which nothing has been put, and out of which all has been taken during more than three years. The message that Miss Dora wrote to me from you was a timely one, sir. The farm wanted my presence, and no mistake."

"Well, I had no reason to think any positive ill of Dawes," said the Squire; "still, when I saw the same field sowed with wheat for three successive years——"

"Dawes is a scoundrel," said Steven, quietly. "The land may have been over-cropped and under-manured through ignorance—*may*, I say; though I don't much believe in want of design even there. In actual hard cash the man has been robbing us for years. He robbed my uncle in his lifetime, young Josh in his, and me since young Josh's death."

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence, are you sure of this?" cried Katharine. "Are you sure that you are not judging him too hastily? I always think poor Dawes has such a good face!"

"And I have looked over his accounts, Miss Fane," said Steven, "and, poor scholar though I am, have proved him to be dishonest. It took me five hours to-day. I never reckoned so many figures in my life——"

"And the end of it was?" asked the Squire.

"My bidding Dawes leave the farm, and show his face there no more; him, and all belonging to him."

"What!" cried Mr. Hilliard, "you gave him warning on the spot! A harsh measure, wasn't it, Lawrence? Ashcot has been his home for years."

"I gave him no warning at all, sir," said Steven. "I turned him out, him and his sons, and all that they claimed as belonging to them, into the road. Old Barbara and I will be the only inmates of Ashcot to-night."

"And you think this right, just?" cried Katharine, indignantly. "Allowing Dawes to have been ignorant—dishonest, even—you think it right to act like this? to turn a man who till this morning was counted honest out of your house like a common thief?"

"It is my idea of right," said Steven, humbly. "The life I have led has taught me that there's never any good in shilly-shallying when you've got to deal with a blackguard. If a man wrongs me I punish him, if I can, in hot blood, and in the hour when I find him out; and when I knowingly wrong any man, I shall expect to be treated the same. This is my idea of justice, and I couldn't go from it, although I'm quite ready to confess I may be wrong."

"And what will the Daweses do?" cried the Squire, taken aback at the idea of this sort of lynch-law being imported into the parish. "Upon my word, Lawrence, I think you have been over-hasty. I hope you did not mention my name, now? Dawes is a man very well spoken of in the neighbourhood."

"The better for him," said Steven, shortly; "of course I didn't mention your name, sir—the better for him that he is spoken well of. He will find work come quicker to his hand."

"And what labour do you mean to take on the farm yourself then?"

"As little as I can get along with," answered Steven. "When I

was a boy I remember that my uncle and myself, and a couple of lads, generally did the work pretty well, with extra hands, of course, at seed time and harvest. I don't see why more labour should be wanted now than there was ten years ago."

"Well, not, of course, if you mean to——"

"I mean," said Steven, as a look from Katharine made the Squire hesitate, "to plough with my own hand and reap with my own arm, as my father and grandfather did before me. There's not much profit to be made by small farms at the best of times now-a-days; but, working as I shall work, Ashcot will yield me a fair living, and let me ride a good horse across country still. As much as I desire."

"Ah, you'll want one thing more, Lawrence," said the Squire, good-humouredly. "You'll want a wife—Kate, my dear, that's the fourth knob you have put in your mother's coffee—a smart little wife to keep your house in order for you. No good for a young fellow like you to talk of getting on steadily at farming or any other business without that, Lawrence."

Steven reddened, and in spite of himself his eyes sought Katharine's face.

"When I marry, sir," said he, "it will be because—because the woman I like will have me, not because the farm wants a mistress. As far as I can see, Barbara will keep house and mind the dairy for me for a good many years to come yet."

Dot had been sitting demurely in the bay-window while the others talked, looking, in her flowered summer dress, and with a knot of ribbon and lace in her short hair, for all the world like a painted porcelain Marchioness (Dot always reminded you of some figure you had seen on Sèvres or Dresden). At Steven's last words she raised her big black eyes for a second to his; then, seeing that he was not looking at her or thinking of her, turned her face away towards the window, and began, under her voice, to sing the refrain of one of those French ballads that mean so little in fact, and yet, sung with a certain sentiment, that may be made to mean so much!

"A Sainte Blaize, à la Zuecca
Vous étiez, vous étiez bien aise
A Sainte Blaize!"

tapping with her small fingers on the glass as an accompaniment.

"My dear Dora!" Mrs. Hilliard interposed in her softest, most injured tone, and opening her eyes, which had been shut ever since the Squire had diverted Steven's attention from herself.

"Yes, aunt Arabella?"

"My poor head, Dora love! Singing, or rather humming always drives me to distraction, as you know."

"Oh, I beg a thousand pardons!" cried Dot, jumping up. "Whenever I see the sun setting I feel I am out of doors, and whenever I am out of doors I feel I must sing! Who will come out? Will you, Katharine—will you, uncle Frank—when you have finished your coffee?"

The Squire was much too well broken in to his duties, somewhat too much afraid also of the effects of evening damp upon his own rheumatism, to leave the invalid alone. "Thank you, Dora my dear, I make it a rule never to stir out after dinner till the middle of the month—till it's dry enough, you know, Dot, for your poor aunt to go out with us. However, that's no reason you and Kate shouldn't take Lawrence for a walk about the place. He'll see it just as it always was, scarcely a tree altered, except perhaps the plantation beyond the rickyard. Kate, be sure you point out the young larches to him. I should like Lawrence's opinion as to the distance Macgregor has set them apart."

Dora tripped away into the passage for her garden-hat, a coquetish Watteau-like hat with knots of blue ribbon and broad shepherdess brim; Katharine, who never studied effect (of this kind), and was perfectly indifferent to evening dews or fresh breezes, opened the French window and walked out, bare-headed, into the sunset with Steven following her.

"My dear," said the Squire to his wife a minute or two later, as he stood looking out upon the garden, his coffee-cup in his hand, "do you know, a very curious fancy has just come into my head?"

"Has it, Mr. Hilliard?"

"I shouldn't, of course, wish to hurt Dot's pride in any way, but it strikes me—well, it strikes me, Arabella, Master Lawrence is trying to pay his attentions to her. He was very anxious to turn it off,

I remarked, when I joked him about getting a wife. Now what do you say?"

"What do you expect me to say, Frank?"

"Nay, my love, what do *you* think—what do you think?" said the Squire. "Of course I know you have had more experience in all these things than I have."

"What things, Mr. Hilliard?"

"Why, my dear, love and courtship, and—and all that!" cried the Squire, feeling that he had not hit upon a happy remark.

"Frank!" observed Mrs. Hilliard, opening her mild blue eyes very wide at him; "I see your attempt at sarcasm, but it does not wound me. I am past being wounded! May I ask you to ring for Williams?"

"Sarcasm! I will not ring for Williams; you know you never sleep when you go to bed so early—sarcasm! Merciful heaven! what did I say that could be called sarcasm?" cried the Squire, all contrition and humility. "Did I ever in my life say or imagine an unkind word towards you? Now do, my poor child, be reasonable—I mean forgive me. I hadn't an idea of offending you, upon my soul I hadn't! You were very amiable to the young man at dinner, and as far as looks and manners go——"

"Mr. Hilliard," interrupted the invalid, "it's no use trying to turn it off like that. I wasn't thinking of Dot or of Steven Lawrence—who is not in the slightest degree attentive to her—but of what you said about love and courtship. If there is one man on earth who should be the last to taunt me with infidelity to my Richard's memory, that man is you."

Which led on naturally to the poor little Squire's going through one of those daily scenes of recrimination from the lips of his angel, and confessions of cruelty from his own, that were the sentimental salt of Mrs. Hilliard's life; the only excitement she ever derived, except from novels. "I believe, indeed I know, I'm a fool in these things," he said, meekly, when peace was at last restored; "but still I do think it looks like it." Katharine, for some reason, had returned to the house; and Steven and Dora were to be seen standing somewhat close together at a distant corner of the lawn.

"And upon my word I should be very glad if it was so. Quite time the poor girl was comfortably settled in a home of her own. Now I wonder, Arabella, whether Lawrence knows she will have a thousand pounds on her wedding day?"

"It would be a delicate thing for you to tell him so, Mr. Hilliard—very delicate indeed. Dora is *my* dead Theodosia's child, and Steven Lawrence a peasant."

The poor Squire bit his lips to prevent getting into further trouble, and walked up and down the room, in noiseless tiptoe fashion long habit had taught him, until the mild blue eyes of his angel were closed in earnest.



CHAPTER XVII.

STREPHON AND PHILLIS.

It was a bright cool evening; one of those May evenings in which spring and summer mingle so deliciously, that while you welcome the coming roses you more than half regret the fickle hawthorn-scented month that is dying. The cheerful dappled sky, the blossoming orchards, the waves of fawn and pink and soft dun green in the grass-fields as the light wind passed over them, made up just the kind of gentle, homely picture whose charm, like that of Gainsborough's paintings, or Cowper's verses, we can never analyze and never outlive. Even Dot, who seldom paid nature the attention of remembering whether the sun was rising or setting, summer blooming or fading, was alive to the freshness and fragrance of the "back-ground" as she stood beside Steven on the Squire's lawn, and looked round—wondering what subject would be the best to begin upon—at the smiling country.

"How delightfully green everything is looking, Mr. Lawrence! what a relief after London! I was so glad, and to speak honestly so surprised, when Katharine consented to come home on Sunday."

Katharine had just found some excuse for leaving them alone together; and Steven, one of whose savage habits it was to remain silent when he had nothing to say, was standing watching the flutter of her summer dress as she re-crossed the lawn in the direction of the

house. "I beg your pardon, Miss Dora," he cried, as Dot's penetrating voice recalled him to a sense of her existence. "You were saying——"

"How glad I was that I had been able to get away from town rather earlier than usual this season—thanks to Lord Petres' departure!" added Dot, maliciously. "Would you mind walking about a little? Katharine will find us just the same; but I find it too chilly to stand, and the dew is falling."

Steven walked on by her side obediently; and Dot led him to a broad grass terrace, shut away by shrubs out of sight of the house, and with a full view of Clithero Bay, unruffled now as a little inland lake, and with the smooth high tide breaking on the sandy beach, scarcely more than a stones-throw beneath where they stood. "This is the terrace I reminded you of in my letter," said Dot. "Do you remember it? Do you remember one Sunday evening when I was here, and saw you in your boat——"

"And came down and went out to sea with me," interrupted Steven. "I do remember it well, though I suppose I haven't thought of it for ten years or more; and how frightened we both were of being found out—I, because I knew I had been breaking the Sabbath, and you—you, Miss Dora, because you knew what your aunt and cousin would say to you for being seen in my company."

Dot was silent for a moment; then, with a want of abashment so entire as to make Steven feel excessively abashed, and at the top of her voice, she carolled forth a stanza from the time-worn song about thorns and flowers, and the willingness of the singer to give up the hopes of years for those "bygone hours." In all the best theatrical representations of country courtship which she had seen it had been the successful custom of the heroine to enliven the prose part of the scene with verses of song, delivered in a loud voice, and with arch glances at the hero, and poor Dot really was doing her best to act a pretty Phillis to this great obtuse Strephon at her side. Katharine had cautioned her not to talk of balls and Paris and London, as she would to Mr. Clarendon Whyte, but to be simple, and, above all, natural in her conversation with Steven Lawrence; and Dot's ideas of nature and simplicity were to pay pretty compliments to the setting

sun, and wear a broad straw hat trimmed with blue ribbon, and give arch glances, and sing. Was it her fault if the yeoman failed to appreciate the part that she was acting down to his level and for his benefit?

"I—I have something I want particularly to say to you," she cried at last, as Steven stood silent, and looking rather less affected than she had expected by the song; "but I hardly know how to begin it. When your cousin died, and Uncle Frank did not think things about the farm were going on as they ought, I undertook to write, because they all said you would remember me best—and then, you know, I sent you my photograph. Please tell me you didn't think it a very strange thing for me to do?"

"Now is my time!" thought Steven; for, cost him what it might, he had already fully made up his mind to set matters straight with Dora Fane. "I'd as lief be shot, as have to hurt the poor little thing's feelings, but there's no choice left me!" and then stammering like a guilty schoolboy, and not daring to look at her, he blurted the truth out. "You sent me—it was very good of you to think of me at all, I'm sure—but you sent me your cousin's photograph, not your own! I have never had a chance to tell you this before. Of course, as soon as I saw you both together in town, I knew you had made a mistake, and that I must ask your pardon for the letter I wrote, and—and there's no harm done!" he went on, desperately; "and I hope, Miss Dora, you'll show you forgive me, by giving me your own now." All this in a breath, as if he had been saying a lesson learnt by rote; but, as you may remark, clearing himself most explicitly, and not abating a syllable from the disagreeable or unflattering part of his explanation.

Dora Fane gave one quick upward look at his face. Something she saw there—his earnestness, perhaps, or his confusion—amused her; and she had to bite her lip hard to repress a smile. "Katharine's picture! Now, *could* I really have made such a ridiculous mistake? At all events, you were the gainer, Mr. Lawrence. Kate makes such a beautiful photograph, doesn't she? and I really can't see why you should talk about asking any one's forgiveness. Keep dear Kate's picture, by all means, as you have been lucky enough to

get it, and I'll give you one of my own too, with pleasure. Do you like full-lengths or vignettes best?"

"And there are people who say women are not generous!" thought Steven. Could a man have got over a wound to his vanity so quickly, however indifferent he might have been to the woman who gave it? "Whatever you like to give me, I shall be grateful for, Miss Dora. The picture that is the best likeness of you would please me most."

"Well, for the matter of that, I never think these very small photographs have much real likeness in them," said Dot, impartially. "Now Kate and I, little as you would think it, are often taken for each other in our cartes de visite. *Is* it possible that you have been mistaken after all? Was the photograph a vignette, or what! You couldn't show it to me, of course?"

"Oh yes, I could," answered Steven, in his simplicity, and taking the locket from his waistcoat pocket. "Can you open it?—so. A wonderfully good likeness I call that, as far as I can judge."

Dora looked at the photograph; confessed at once to her stupidity; admired the setting of the locket—had no idea they sold such pretty things in barbarous countries like Mexico—and then returned it quietly into Steven's hands. "If Lord Petres was a jealous man, I might make nice mischief, by telling him that you wear Katharine's photograph, mightn't I?" she cried, with another sidelong glance at Steven's face, to assure herself that the shot told.

"I think not, Miss Dora," he answered; "Lord Petres could no more mind my possessing Miss Fane's picture, than the Emperor of France could mind my wearing one of the Empress, if I had the folly to choose to do so."

"No, of course, Lord Petres would not mind. I said *if* Lord Petres was jealous, he might not like it. But Lord Petres is not jealous—very fortunately for him," added Dot, with emphasis; "Lord Petres is not jealous."

"Well, no, I should say not," said poor Steven. "What has a man like Lord Petres to be jealous of? He has fortune, birth——"

"And Katharine Fane for his future wife!" cried Dot, as Steven hesitated. "Mr. Lawrence, is not my cousin beautiful?"

"Ay," said Steven, "that indeed she is, and not beautiful only."

"In Katharine has something in her voice and manner that makes her one over her. The founder of her class at any one in the world. She has always been my friend from the first day they brought me here. Oh, it makes me shudder, actually shudder," cried Dot, "when I think of what my life will be after Katharine goes."

"Does?" exclaimed Steven, hastily. "Does? But when will that be?"

"Very, when she marries, to be sure," said Dot. "It is impossible that the wedding can be delayed later than this summer. They have been engaged—let me see—nearly a year and a half already, and there has always been something, hitherto, to delay the marriage. At first Katharine said she was too young; then Lord Peter was ill; then Lord Peter French said gave warning; then Lord Peter French would stay. But now it really is coming off, I believe. It will be a charming marriage for dear Kate, you know. Lord Peter has I don't say how many thousands a year, and is a very nice little man, and Katharine is so attached to him, and then he is a Catholic and everything."

"And is Miss Fane a Catholic?" asked Steven, feeling more hopelessly far from Katharine in every word Dot uttered. "I thought she was in Church with you and the Squire yesterday?"

"Oh, yes! she goes to the church of England, and nominally belongs to it still," said Dot; "but everybody knows where Kate's heart is—when she makes no secret of her intention of returning openly to the church after her marriage. We are all Catholics by birth, you know, only my aunt when she married Mr. Hilliard, went over, from innocence, I believe, to his way of thinking, and so Kate and Arabella were brought up to be Protestants. Religion was not a subject Arabella troubled her head about, but Kate, young as she was, never in heart went away from the old faith. You know our *Reverend* no? Well, nothing but his being so high—oh, ultra, ultra high!" cried Dot, stretching up her small hand as if to represent the very pinnacles of ritualism, "would make Kate tolerate him as she does."

"And you, Miss Dora?" said Steven, "are you a Catholic or a Protestant, or half one and half the other, like your cousin?"

"I? oh, Mr. Lawrence!" and Dot shook her head and looked solemn. "I'm a firm Protestant; indeed, if I have a leaning it is altogether the other way. I like to have the word preached to me without adornment. No incense, no vestments, no grand church shows for me! My religion is plain and humble, as my position in life must be."

She spoke with a ring of mournfulness in her voice; and Steven, whose upright soul never suspected man or woman of insincerity, felt his sympathies increase towards her. Could this be the woman of whom Lord Petres had said that she would be about as good a companion for a man as a gilt butterfly? the frivolous woman with expensive tastes, who in London had had Mr. Clarendon Whyte for her intimate companion, and gone into raptures over Mademoiselle Fleuri's last new wig? "If you like a plain religion you should come to our chapel some Sunday," he remarked; and Dora detected a warmer tone in his voice. "You will hear the word preached without adornment of any kind there. But I suppose," added Steven doubtfully, thinking less perhaps of Dora Fane's individual principles than of the class she represented; "I suppose you would hold it altogether beneath you to go inside a dissenting meeting-house?"

"If I followed my own inclinations I would go there every Sunday of my life," said Dot. "I am weary of all the intoning, and bowing, and vain observances we get at the parish church, but, of course, placed as I am, I have to consider others. Really, I don't think Katharine would ever forgive me if she knew I had been to Shiloh. Once, years and years ago, I remember I went there to evening service, and I believe I was in disgrace for six months afterwards at least!"

"I remember," said Steven, "it was before I went to America. You came in with Hoskins, who was apprenticed at that time, Miss Dora, to old Blake at Stourmouth."

The colour rose into Dot's face at the mal-adroit reminiscence; but the light had faded too much for Steven to notice it. "In those days," said she, "we used to be Dora and Steven to each other! I don't know, as old old friends, why we should be so formal in our way of speaking now?"

"In those days we were children, or little more," remarked Steve promptly. "In those days I was ignorant of the difference between your station and mine."

"Well, I hoped—I mean I thought—from your letter you would show the same happy ignorance still!" said Dot. "Station! oh, I have heard about rank and station till I am sick of the very thought of them. But, of course, it shall be as you like!" She stopped and sighed.

Thoroughly honest though Steven was, it was not to be expected that he would repulse an offer of friendship so humbly, so hesitatingly tendered, or remind Dora, a second time, that his letter had been written, in truth, to Katharine, not to her! Perhaps, if I must confess all his weakness, the prospect of being on terms of equality with Katharine's cousin was not displeasing to him; perhaps in his inmost thoughts it seemed to him that friendship with Dora might bridge over, by ever so little, the gulf which divided him from Lord Peter's future wife!

"You are all goodness to me, Miss Dora, and nothing would flatter me more than to hear you call me by my name as you used, only—"

"Only, remember you will have to call me by mine in return."

"I . . . really, I don't think I could," said Steven shyly. "You must remember I haven't spoken to a lady for these ten years. I don't think I could ever bring myself to commit such a boldness."

"Oh yes, I think you could when you get a little less afraid of me!" cried Dot, with one of her shrill laughs. "I, at all events, shall begin speaking to you at once as I used to speak in the days when we were not too old to be natural!"

And she was as good as her word. When Miss Fane rejoined them some minutes later, the first sound she heard was Steven's name, proceeding, in the most perfectly matter-of-course tone imaginable, from Dot's lips. And Katharine's heart revolted from the sound! Her dream—a minute ago she would have told herself, her desire—had been that Steven and Dora should marry. To this end she had forgiven him his fatal error when he first met her in Hertford Street; to this end had made the Squire invite him to dinner; to this end had schooled Dora as to the wickedness of regretting a man like Clarendon

Whyte, and risking the loss of an affection sterling and true as Steven's. Yet now, so perverse, so inexplicably crooked is human nature, now that her ears assured her an explanation had taken place between them ; that if they were not lovers, they were certainly walking in the right road to become so, a pang sharper than she had suffered in her whole life (a life, remember, which had never yet known love or jealousy), contracted her heart. She remembered Steven's supplicating voice when she parted from him last ; remembered the pressure of his hand ; remembered the expression of his face as he stood and watched their carriage drive away from the Opera House ; remembered how, when she had been on her knees that night, the thought of him had come between her and heaven, and how she had prayed that his madness might pass away, and that poor little Dora might become his wife. Well, the prayer that had seemed so presumptuous then was answered : that was all ! Three days later, and her prayer was answered ; and Steven, just as inconstant as if he had been civilized for years, was paying his suit to Dora already. It was right, very right. The poor yeoman had been brought to see the folly of his love, and had renounced it—lightly as men do renounce their love—and she would be spared the indignity of having to repulse him anew. She had managed the whole affair beautifully ; and Dot should never know the humiliation to which she had been forced to stoop for her sake. It was right very right ; and coming to her cousin's side, she put her hand with a kindly little pressure upon her shoulder. Then, Dot's unceasing voice masking the silence of her companions, they all three walked slowly back along the terrace.

Dora accompanied Steven Lawrence into the house to say good-night to the Squire and Mrs. Hilliard, but Katharine just at this minute managed to disappear from the scene, and when Steven came out again to start for his homeward walk, he felt that, either by intention or through indifference, which was worse, she had avoided him. The fresh spring evening had darkened into a still, almost sultry, night ; and when he had got half way along the Squire's avenue, Steven bethought himself that it would be pleasanter to re-

turn home, smoking his pipe and dreaming of Miss Fane, by the cool sea-shore, than along the dusty road. A flight of steps led down from the terrace to the beach, he remembered, just at the spot where Dora had sung to him about "bygone hours;" and retracing his steps he made his way past the house, thence by the upper lawn and through the shrubberies to the eastern end of the terrace: the end from whence, in daylight, the low white walls of Ashcot could be seen across the blue sweep of Clithero Bay. The night was moonless, but there was sufficient glimmering twilight left to discern objects at ten or fifteen yards distant; and as Steven was walking quickly on, he caught sight of a figure leaning against the terrace-wall, just at the head of the steps by which he had to pass. It was Katharine: her white dress fluttering through the gloom, the outline of her head and throat showing delicately clear against the vapoury background of grey sea and sky. Steven made his way on noiselessly across the close-shorn turf, and in another moment was at her side. "Miss Katharine," said he, under his breath, "won't you say good-night to me before I go?"

She turned round to him with a half-frightened cry: "Mr. Lawrence, how you startled me! Was it in this ghostly fashion you used to steal down upon the bears and panthers, sir? I never thought any one would miss me. I only came away because——"

"Because?" asked Steven, as she hesitated.

"Oh, because I detest having to go into hot rooms and candle-light at this time of the year. I like to stand here alone when it is dark like this, and hear, or fancy I hear, the tide turn. It has just ebbed now. Stay silent for a while, and see if you can't detect a farther-off sound in each fall of the waves."

Steven remained silent as she bade him, not listening to the waves, or to any other sound in the universe, but with his eyes fixed intently upon the exquisite, shadowed face at his side. After a few minutes, Katharine looked up to him again.

"Now, wasn't there a difference. Could you not distinctly tell that the last wave was farther away from us than the one before?"

"I was not thinking of the waves at all," answered Steven. "I never heard whether they rose or fell."

"Mr. Lawrence, are you speaking in earnest?"

"Quite in earnest, Miss Fane. Don't you remember the bond I am under to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, to you?"

"Oh, but I think that bond is cancelled!" cried Katharine. "The moment we began to put it into practice, I found that listening to truth was much less agreeable than I had expected, and got cross with you: do you recollect?"

"I recollect," said Steven; "but I don't think you need be angry with me for telling the truth now. I never heard the break of the waves, just as I never heard the voices of the singing people at the theatre, because I was with you, and——"

"Ah, Mr. Lawrence, please—please—don't pay me a compliment!" interrupted Katharine, shrinking a little away, and in her heart retracting every harsh thing she had thought of Steven during the last half hour. "If you knew how tired I am of pretty complimentary speeches, I am sure you would never make me any again as long as you live."

"I will always do exactly as you bid me at the moment," said Steven with humility; "if telling the truth is making a pretty complimentary speech, of course I will tell the truth no more."

"That's right. You know I am looking forward to seeing you very often at our house, and I want you, really and truly, to look upon me as a friend. There can be no pretty speeches or compliments between people who are friends in earnest, can there?"

Steven said not a word; and Katharine Fane felt more strangely, more humiliatingly embarrassed than she had ever felt in her life before, by his silence.

"I was very glad to see you and mamma get on so well," she began desperately, after two or three minutes' dead pause; "and Dora, too—you and Dora must have so much to say to each other after all these years. I—I hope we shall see you again before very long."

"As soon as you tell me to come, I will come," answered Steven, with his accustomed bluntness.

"Well, Wednesday then, or to-morrow if you will; you will be quite sure to find Dora and poor mamma at home, whenever you call—Listen! can that really be ten o'clock that is striking? Oh,

Mr. Lawrence, I think I must go in now," and she took a step or two in the direction of the house. "It is getting so dark and——"

"And you *will* wish me good night, Miss Fane, will you not?"

"Why, of course, I will. Good night."

She held out her hand; but Steven, not knowing that she had offered it, turned shortly away; the sweet "Good night" making him only too contented—poor wretch! and Katharine stood and watched his tall figure until it was lost from sight among the purple shadows on the beach.

When she got back to the house the first person she saw was Dora, candle in hand, on the staircase. "What, Kate!" cried Dot, looking round, "I thought you had gone to bed an hour ago—and how white you are!" scrutinizing her narrowly. "Did you see Steven Lawrence as he went away?"

"I saw Mr. Lawrence for a moment, Dot."

"And what did he tell you?"

"Tell me? Nothing in particular. I only saw him for a moment," and Katharine hesitated.

"Oh, I didn't know," cried Dot, carelessly; "I thought, perhaps, he might have told you of our conversation. I explained to him the mistake about the photograph, and it appears he knew it was yours from the first—that's all. We quite understand each other now, Kate."

"I suspected as much when I heard you calling him 'Steven,'" said Katharine, quietly. "Ah, Dot, I wonder how soon this first act of the play will be over? I wonder how soon I shall have to offer you good wishes in earnest?"

"'A Sainte Blaize, à la Zuecca,'"

sang Dot:

"' Dans les près fleuris cueillir la verveine.

. . . Mais de vous en souvenir

Prendrez vous la peine?"

Kate," peeping down through the banisters, and looking more weirdly like a painted porcelain figure than ever, "how glad I am I took your advice about Steven! It *does* so set one's conscience at rest, to be perfectly honest and straightforward, doesn't it?"

"I don't think I know, Dot. I'm not quite sure whether I have a conscience or not," answered Katharine, modestly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TIME OF ROSES.

IN a fortnight's time Steven Lawrence, first on one excuse, then another, had become an almost daily visitor at the Dene. The Squire, retaining his first opinion as to the real object of Steven's visits, was always ready to greet him with friendly heartiness ; and at the end of three days managed to let him know the amount of Dot's marriage portion. Mrs. Hilliard, who, since the French Revolution, had passed through three or four new phases of romantic hallucination, seemed still disposed to make the yeoman's picturesque person a peg on which to hang the fabric of her harmless dreams. Dora Fane treated him with the sisterly familiarity which from the first she had contrived to establish between them ; a familiarity compromising herself in nothing, thought Dot ; but which, at the first inevitable moment of rebound—the first moment when Kate's caprice should have passed—might ripen just into whatever feeling she herself chose. And Katharine ? For the first time in her life Katharine felt that she was being drawn along by an influence stronger far than coquetry or love of conquest ; an influence alien altogether to her own vanity ; sweet as the young June sun above her head, and irresistible as it was sweet.

A dream, a dream ! she would say to herself a dozen times a day. Steven Lawrence in his heart cared, must care, for Dot, and would one day marry her, as surely as she cared for, and would marry Lord Petres. If she looked forward to his coming, it was for Dot's sake ; if she found a new, bright pleasure in walking beside him in this glad summer weather, it was merely because Steven himself was new and bright ; unlike all the other human beings of her experience. "A beautiful savage," she had called him, extenuating his misdeeds to her conscience on that first evening of their meeting in London ; "a creature outside the pale of all conventionalities whatsoever, and to be treated like no other man ." and in this same spirit—so she strove to assure herself—she still regarded him. Dot was fortunate, very. The happiest hour, she thought, in her own life would be that

in which she would see her cousin (the foolish prejudices of rank laid aside) become the legitimate owner of a heart simple and strong as Steven's. And in the meantime—in the meantime the fields were blossoming and the thrushes singing, and Steven's face and voice and mute adoration for ever present at her side !

Not one directly disloyal feeling had, as yet, stirred in Katharine Fane's breast. To have refrained from encouraging Steven simply because she suspected him of liking her a little too well for his own peace, had been to run counter to every old instinct, every old habit of her nature. A great many men besides this one had professed to be in despair about her during the last three years ; and she had smiled at first upon them all, then frowned—when their despair became inconveniently definite—then smiled again ; and never seen broken hearts or serious ruin of any sort ensue from her cruelty. It would be just the same now. Steven Lawrence had come home from America prepared to love and marry Dora Fane ; and, of course, but for the foolish mistake of the photograph, the love-story would have gone on in its appointed course ; most likely have arrived at its last stage by this time. That it would all come right in the end there could be no doubt. It was not so forward, perhaps, as she had thought on that first evening when Steven dined at the Dene : but Dot for certain was growing to like him ; never laughed when he was absent at his savage ways and want of polish, or of kid gloves ; never mentioned Mr. Clarendon Whyte now. In another fortnight, unless east wind returned, Lord Petres was coming over from Paris to visit them ; probably to settle upon the time of their marriage ; and then, thought Katharine, all this pleasant pastoral interlude, of which Steven was the hero, would be over. She was not quite sure that when the time came she would be able to resign the poor fellow's worship without some pangs of regret : not quite sure that her own life would not seem somewhat blank on the day when she would be obliged, distinctly and for ever, to look upon him coldly. That she could be cutting him off from all his old peace ; that she could be ruining his life, his prospects, his character, for her selfish pastime, Katharine Fane no more dreamed than a child who grasps a butterfly, and laughs with delight at the coloured dust it leaves upon its fingers, dreams of the butterfly's real position in the game.

Perhaps a woman whose experience in the matter of love has been confined to London drawing-rooms may be excused, on the score of ignorance, for somewhat underrating men's capabilities for sentimental suffering.

The early roses had blown and fallen ; the varied tints of hedge-row and coppice were changing fast into the deep-hued monotone of midsummer ; and at length the day came when Lord Petres was to arrive at the Dene. It was such weather as makes you feel it a sin to stay half an hour together in the house ; warm unclouded weather, with cool winds stirring from the west, with freshness of recent rains making the green world sweet ; and Katharine, who had been running restlessly about her flower-garden all the morning, declared her intention, immediately after lunch, of paying a round of visits to her poor people that afternoon.

"My dear Kate, *do* you forget who is coming ?" cried Mrs. Dering, who had arrived the night before on a three days' visit to her mother. "You are so sunburnt already, and—just suppose Lord Petres should be here before you are back !"

"He would not die of despair, I hope," said Katharine, putting on her hat ; "I haven't visited my people for more than a week, and to-morrow I must stay at home—at least, I suppose so—and the next day as well. Good-bye, Arabella. Give my love to Lord Petres, if you see him before I do !" And ten minutes later she was singing as she walked along through the green corn-fields : wondering whether it was the thought of seeing her lover that made her heart so light, then—with a sigh, and breaking down abruptly in her song—whether next June, whether any June, would ever be as full of sweetness to her as this that had newly fled.

Miss Fane's "people" were scattered far and wide over the straggling parish of Clithero, and by the time all her visits were paid the sun was already in the West. Once upon a time, in the true spirit of sectarianism, Catharine had laid it down as an axiom that she would never enter the cottage of a dissenter. Only church-people ought to be relieved at all, she said sternly (in theory) ; and among church-people only those who were members of the church *in earnest*. But somehow, this rule of hers did not wear ; somehow,

when she got abroad among the poor, poverty, sickness, a brood of tiny children—want, weakness, pain, and not orthodoxy—were the voices which ever cried aloud to this staunch churchwoman's heart. "It's very easy to talk to those who ought to be helped!" she said, when the Squire teased her once about the falling off of her principles, and the especially latitudinarian character of a family of her dearest protégés; "but when you see people face to face, and they are sick and hungry and miserable, how can you remember religion—I mean difference of religion?" As soon as Jim Neele has got a boat again, and when the children are up from the fever, I'll begin to talk to them seriously about never coming to church."

So to-day, after duly visiting all her church-people, the cottage which Katharine kept for the last, and at which she knew her visit from predilection would be the longest, was that of this very Jim Neele; a fisherman of lax theological tenets—Shilohite rather than churchman, when he remembered to go to any place of worship at all—with a poor, clean, over-worked wife and six children, all miraculously near each other in size, and the oftenest-washed freshest-cheeked little brood to be seen in the parish.

Poor Mrs. Neele, as usual, was looking utterly children-worn and meek and hollowed-eyed; with her arms up to the elbows in soap-suds, and two or three small boys and girls winding themselves tightly up in the skirts of her patched cotton gown. So, after some friendly talk about Jim and the prospects of mackerel, and Lizzie Jane's teeth, and when something from the visitor's ready purse had made the worn mother's face brighten beautifully, Katharine proposed that she should take off Dan and the baby (really the last baby but one; there was always in the Neele family a pink morsel lying asleep in the cradle, but too indefinite as yet to be taken into calculation) with her for a walk upon the waste. "Just to get them out of your way, Mrs. Neele," said Katharine, in the courteous unpatronizing way that made all these people love her: rough independent fisher-people, who would have tolerated no fine lady with tracts and good advice inside their doors. "Please don't look frightened," she added, "I shall take the greatest care of them, and bring them back in an hour, when you have done washing, and it's *time for me to return home.*"

The waste was a long strip of sea-board land that ran, broken at intervals by the seamen's narrow strips of garden, from one end to the other of the parish. Land too arid to yield anything beyond coarse scant grass, musk-thistles and sea convolvulus—just sufficient food for the donkeys and goats that browsed there—but amidst whose sandy undulations it was pleasant, on a July day, to sit and watch the tide break on the distant rocks ; with the faint line of Essex coast for background, and the broad arch of summer blue above your head. A favourite resting-place of "lady's," as little Dan Neele knew ; and a place where sweeties were given to appearing miraculously on the ground beside "lady" as she sat. So shoulder-ing Katharine's parasol in a style learnt from the coast-guardsmen, and with a great cotton sun-bonnet of his mother's nearly covering his entire figure, Dan marched on, as fast as his three-year-old legs could carry him, with Miss Fane bearing a stout baby girl of eighteen months aloft in her arms behind.

She chose a spot for their halting-place where there were plenty of yellow dandelions at hand for Dan to pick, and a small croft or hollow of dry white sand in which the baby could sit and paddle with her hands and feet, or crow at the spikes of the sea-pinks that broke off short in her fingers when she tried to pluck them. These two occupations lasted for a considerable time ; then Dan's mind suddenly reverting to more exciting pleasures than dandelions, he came up to Miss Fane's side, threw down his flowers in a heap, and thrusting a nut-brown fist into her lap, said, "Sweeties !"

"Sweeties ? oh no !" cried Katharine with an accent of deceitful surprise. "No sweeties to-day ; Dan, feel in my pocket and see—and baby too. Come baby and feel !"

A feint by which she won for herself the music—can be any sweeter !—of Dan and baby's surprised gurgling laughter when at length they had pulled out a paper of sugar-candy, peppermint-drops, and other faintly-sticky treasures, and emptied them upon the clean fresh skirt of "lady's" dress. It took another half-hour or so before the refreshment was eaten, for Dan had views on the subject of sweeties not unlike those of his forefathers with respect to jetsam and flotsam, holding that, when fortuitous circumstances had once

cast them adrift, either from the mouth or fingers of others, and they lay frosted deep in sand on the ground, they were by right, the property of the finder: views that his sister resented by shrill cries and beating the air with her hands and feet, whenever he attempted to put them into practice. At last peace was restored. The baby alternately addressing remarks in an unknown language to her own bare pink toes or "lady's" watch-chain, sat contentedly on Katharine's lap; Dan with round eyes, and his little red tongue outstretched upon his chin in admiration, knelt at her side; while with deft fingers, Miss Fane wove the stalks of his discarded heap of dandelions into chains. "Real chains, Dan: one for you, and one for baby—just like mine." The jeweller's work over, Katharine took out her watch, and finding that it was nearly time for her to return home, bade Dan find a stalk with a "clock" on it, to see if mother wanted him yet!

Dan, who was evidently familiar with this system of time-keeping, started off solemnly on his quest among the sand-heaps, shortly returning with a "clock," just in the proper stage of ripe perfection, in his hand; and Katharine, both children watching her, had just blown the last bit of down away from the stalk, when a long shadow passed suddenly between her and the west. She gave a start, and looking up—one hand uplifted to screen the sun from her eyes, the other clasped round the baby, and with Dan, all eagerness as to what the clock said, sitting firmly on her dress—she saw Steven.

"Mr. Lawrence—appearing in his usual ghostly fashion!" she cried. "What in the world could have brought you here? I've lived fifteen years in Clithero, and never met any but small people like this," laying her hand on Dan's yellow curls, "on the waste before."

"I don't know what brought me here," said Steven, "except it is that I have a kind of instinct for tracking you out and troubling you, Miss Fane. You'll begin to feel soon that you can't get away from me whichever way you walk."

Then he knelt down, a few paces distant from her, on the ground, and thought Katharine Fane had never looked so beautiful (and so near to him) as she did at this minute in her simple white dress, and

with the bright sun shining on her face, and these cottage children in her arms ! Something in his expression brought up the blood into Katharine's cheeks, and, setting the baby hastily on the sand again, she told Dan to play with her. "And—and which would you call my shortest way home, Mr. Lawrence?"—a palpable attempt at finding conversation. Katharine knew every path-way, every turning, among the fields for miles around. "Straight along by the shore, or through Elliot's hop-garden ? Lord Petres is coming by the five o'clock train, you know, and I must be home in time to meet him, if I can."

"The shortest way," said Steven, "is neither by the coast nor by Elliot's hop-garden, but through a corner of Ashcot. You should turn to the right just by the two poplars yonder, and go straight across the Five Acres into the London Road. I'll speak the truth," he went on after a moment : "I was working in the Five Acres half an hour ago, and it wasn't accident at all that brought me here. I saw a white gown and yellow umbrella, and knew it must be you, so I came."

"A white gown and yellow umbrella," cried Katharine, laughing. "I think I had better leave off this Japanese style of dress, if it makes me a landmark for the whole county round. Why, Ashcot must be a mile off, at least ?"

"Not that, I think," said Steven ; "but I have very good sight at all times, and of course I should know you at any distance."

"I wonder whether that is flattering to me individually," said Katharine, "or only a natural result of carrying yellow umbrellas and wearing white gowns ? I don't know how it is," she added, "but you and I can never speak to one another for two minutes without getting on the subject of compliments. Now to-day—you won't be very much surprised, I dare say—but I am going to say something the reverse of complimentary to you to-day."

"Something true, I hope ?" said Steven, quickly. "That is all I care about. Whatever you say, you know I shall believe you."

"You may perfectly believe in this. It is—oh, Mr. Lawrence !" cried Katharine, speaking in the quick eager way that, acted or un-acted, was so irresistible in her, "it is to say *how* it pains me when

I think of your keeping up so much bad feeling towards Daws! Half the people in the parish have been talking to me about it to-day. When first you told us what you had done I thought you had, horribly hard—I don't mind saying so. I never liked you so little as when I heard you speak quietly of having turned the wretched man out of Asheot, and now——”

“Now, Miss Fane!”

“Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I can't tell you how much better I should think of you if you would only make amends for your harshness! Take Dawes back upon your farm, or, if that cannot be, try at least to do something for him with others. They say no one will give him work—that he is almost in want already. Character, remember, to a labouring man means bread.”

“And dishonesty means dishonesty,” said Steven, promptly. “I acted, as I must always act, up to my own narrow idea of justice, and by such light as I possess, and I should be worse than weak to go back from my own deed now. If Dawes was dishonest he has no right to my help; if he was not, I had no right to turn him off as I did. There's not much constancy in me,” he added, “either for evil or for good—good especially; but, even with you bidding me, I couldn't bring myself to treat a rogue like an honest man.”

“Not much constancy in you?” said Katharine, looking up suddenly to his face. “I should have said the very reverse. I should have said inconstancy at least would never be one of your sins.”

Her lip quivered; her eyes sank down, half abashed, from his; and for an instant a wild impulse crossed Steven to tell her, then and there, of his passion, and receive his death-sentence from her lips. He had just reason enough left to keep silent and deliberate for a minute or two; by this time Katharine was speaking again, and the sound of her voice checked back his madness this time, as the touch of a cool hand checks back for a moment a sick man's fever.

“Yes, indeed, I have credited you hitherto with the rare quality of fidelity,” she said. “Don't you remember at the opera I laughed at you for having brought back such a worn-out virtue to the regions of civilization?”

“I remember,” said Steven. “You laughed at my primitive virtue,

as you called it, when I said I had no wish to throw myself at the feet of any woman living, save one—and she was not a play actress. 'Tis in ruling my own life, Miss Fane, that I am without steadfastness. I believe—I know," added poor Steven, as simply and humbly as a child, "that where my heart was set I could never change. Better for me, you would say, if I could!"

It was the nearest thing to a positive declaration that Katharine had been forced to hear from him; for ever since that night upon the terrace, and while they had daily met alone, and upon the most friendly terms, Steven had as yet jealously guarded his lips from uttering a syllable that could hurry on the fulfilment of his doom. She played somewhat nervously with the children's heap of flower-stalks that lay beside her; took out her watch, and returned it to her belt without in the least seeing to what hour the hands pointed; then began making irrelevant remarks to Dan, who all this time had been sitting, his eyes first turned to one speaker then the other, and still holding the "clock" that Miss Fane had dropped when Steven appeared.

"You are looking very wise, Dan. I wonder what you're thinking of—sweeties in perspective, or what?"

"What do ze clock say?" answered Dan, holding up his dandelion stalk, and not diverted even by the word "sweeties" from his interest in the mysterious work of divination that had been interrupted by Steven.

"Oh," said Katharine, "you have not forgotten that yet, haven't you, Dan? Well, give the clock to me then, and I'll tell you. We had got to five, six, you know; now, 'seven, eight; it's very late.' Ah, the clock tells Dan he must make haste home to mother, and that some one from a great way off—some one Dan loves very much—will be home to-night."

Dan received the intelligence with the perfect good faith of his age; thought over it for a minute or two in silence; then, looking up with his big blue eyes into Katharine's face, said gravely, "And what do ze clock say to lady?"

Here, thought Katharine, with a sudden inspiration of pity, was a great occasion for her to say something "definite" to Steven: some-

thing reminding him unmistakably of Lord Petres, and the position in which Lord Petres stood towards herself, yet worded (for Dan's comprehension) in phrase so gentle, so kindly, as to put the poor fellow out of his misery painlessly. Painlessly ! did not the Frenchman who invented it use some such expression when he first described the beneficent qualities of the guillotine ?

"The clock says to lady, Dan, that she must go home quick, because——"

"No, no," interrupted Dan, "seven, eight."

"Oh, you young rogue ! how children always will insist upon every syllable being repeated to them verbatim—'seven, eight, getting late.' Well, the clock says to lady that she must go home quick, and that some one from a great way off will be home to-night——"

"Some one lady loves very much," interposed Dan, not in a tone of interrogation, but simply as if he was setting Miss Fane straight in her lesson.

"Yes, Dan, quite right !" and Katharine rose hastily to her feet, while a blush, born more than half of guilt, dyed her face and throat. "Some one that lady loves. Poor little Dan !" laying her hand on the child's shoulder, "what home-truths children speak sometimes in their simplicity, Mr. Lawrence !"

Mr. Lawrence answered never a word, but walked on in silence at Miss Fane's side, or rather a step or two in advance of her, towards the Neele's cottage, where the mother stood, surrounded by her other children, and looking out anxiously for Dan and the baby at the door. Katharine, of course, had to talk to her for a few minutes, and be thanked for her goodness in being troubled with that "good-for-nothing Dan ;" and while she was doing so Steven walked slowly on twenty or thirty yards up the lane.

He stopped at the turn beside the poplars that led to Ashcot, and when Miss Fane came up took off his hat, and wished her good morning.

"Good morning ?" cried Katharine. "Oh, yes ; I had forgotten. Our paths lie apart here if I go by the shore, which I believe is my best way. Mr. Lawrence," offering him her hand, "I hope you will come over to the Dene soon ? I know Lord Petres would like to see you."

"Thank you, Miss Fane."

"To-morrow do you think you could come?"

"To-morrow I shall finish cutting the grass, such as it is, in the five-acres," said Steven. "Besides, you will have plenty to think of without being troubled by me."

"But in the evening?" she pleaded; "when the busy part of the day is over?"

All this time he had forgotten to take her hand; and something in the blank look of his face as he stood there before her touched Katharine to the quick. Even while honour bade her trifle with him no longer, while honour bade her remember her allegiance to Lord Petres, it went so desperately against her vanity to have to surrender Steven's adoration; went so sharply against every better womanly feeling of her heart to have to witness Steven's pain. Besides, putting herself altogether aside, was she not bound, for Dora's sake, to make him feel that the same friendly welcome would await him at the Dene, whether richer, better-born friends were there or not? "We are going, I believe, to have a terrible solemnity in the shape of a dinner-party to-morrow. Lord Haverstock and the rector are coming, I think; but—but I am sure Dora and I will make our escape from the dining-room as early as we can, and get out of doors. So if you thought you *could* come round about eight o'clock as usual?"

Lord Petres had arrived, dinner had begun before Katharine reached home; and when she appeared at table, still in her morning dress and with a bunch of wild roses at her waistbelt, the only explanation she could give of herself was that she had been visiting the poor people along the waste, and "got lost" on her way home.

"Lost!" cried Mr. Hilliard, opening his eyes wide; "however could you get lost, Kate, and the road along the coast as straight as a die?"

"Why, you see, I took a short cut through Ashcot, papa," said Katharine, finching, she knew not why, under Mrs. Dering's eyes. "Steven Lawrence met me and showed me the way, and—and I don't think it was a short cut after all."

"I suppose you have been botanizing, Kate dear," said Mrs. De-

ring, glancing sharply at Katharine's flowers. "You know you always forget time and dinner and everything else when you are weed-hunting."

Lord Petres smiled his accustomed placid smile, and went on with his soup.



CHAPTER XIX.

A HONEYMOON IN TANGIERS.

IT was not without a purpose that Mrs. Dering had voluntarily come down for three days to the country and to her relations during the height of the London season. To say that she believed a sister of hers could stoop so low as to break her faith with a man in the position of Lord Petres would be unjust. Still, a certain tone in Katharine's letters of late, a tone of open defiant exaltation of the country and simple country life over London, had—with hints gathered from other members of the family as to Steven's daily presence at the Dene—been sufficient to impress on a woman of Mrs. Dering's principles the wisdom of allowing her sister's engagement to lag no longer. What, indeed, were they waiting for? Would Lord Petres grow fonder of the thought of matrimony, or Katharine fonder of him, by all this delay? Was it dignified to allow the marriage to be put off thus from one year's end to another? As poor Lord Petres' health was so uncertain, why not fix for the wedding to take place early in the coming autumn, and then let them go off to Italy, Algeria, or any other climate best suited to the bridegroom's lungs for the winter?

So argued Mrs. Dering in a solemn after-dinner conclave with the Squire and her mother, held in Mrs. Hilliard's dressing-room; further urging, as a first practical step in the right direction, that the Squire should have an interview with Lord Petres, as early next morning as he should be visible, on the hitherto neglected subject of settlements. It could be done without consulting Katharine at all. Girls, naturally, were too romantic ever to bear the mention of money, said Mrs. Dering; looking back, no doubt, to the romantic period of her own life, when she was engaged to General Dering. Let the Squire consult with Lord Petres about everything; settle-

ments, pin-money, the month in which the marriage should take place, their plans for the winter; then let Katharine be told quietly of the result. Mrs. Dering believed dear Kate would be happier when she knew that matters were definitely settled. Mrs. Dering had observed that Kate looked decidedly pale at dinner to-day, and could not feel sure that the long engagement was not really beginning to tell upon the poor child's spirits.

It was long before Mr. Hilliard could be brought into accepting the rôle proposed for him. There had never been much cordiality between his eldest step-daughter and the straightforward, warm-hearted Squire; and that Arabella proposed a thing was generally reason enough, *per se*, for Mr. Hilliard to turn obstinate on the instant. He never had any opinion, he said, of this bringing a man up to book. Mrs. Dering looked her quiet indignation at the vulgarity of the phrase. When people wanted to get married, they would *get* married: you might be quite sure about that. It was much fitter Lord Petres should come to him, than he go to Lord Petres, on the subject of settlements. Kate had a good many years of youth before her, and, thank God, wasn't tired of her home yet! Let her have plenty of time to think twice before marrying Lord Petres: "a good enough man in his way, no doubt," said the Squire, jumping up, and waxing hotter and hotter at the sound of his own voice, "but not what I ever thought Kate's husband ought to be; and then, if the poor girl has a mind to change—let her! Better change before than after, Arabella, is what I say in these matters."

Arabella was silent. Ten years of marriage had taught Mrs. Dering how much is to be gained by arguing with a man whose intellect or whose temper is inferior to your own. Mrs. Hilliard, guided by one of the sublime intuitions of folly, burst into a flood of tears, and said she never thought her Richard's children would be told, before her face, that she had degraded herself by a mercenary second marriage.

The suddenness, the utter injustice, of this side attack, was more than the Squire could bear up against. By the time he had sworn that he meant nothing personal when he spoke of mercenary marriages: that he did not mean Katharine's would be a mercenary mar-

riage; that, in fact, he meant nothing whatsoever, but was a monster for having said it;—by the time the Squire was brought to acknowledge this, he was no longer in a state to dispute any mere matter of detail that might be imposed upon him. Mrs. Dering calmly recapitulated, then wrote down on a slip of paper all that it would behoove him to say: settlements so much; pin-money so much; marriage in such a month; Algeria for the winter. And at twelve o'clock next day, hot in the flesh and in the spirit alike, poor Mr. Hilliard found himself waiting in the breakfast-room for Lord Petres, to whom he—or rather to whom Mrs. Dering—had already written a premonitory note in the morning.

It was a bright summer's day, dry and warm as August, but Lord Petres' disbelief in English climate and English country houses was too thorough to be shaken by a gleam of accidental sunshine, and when at length he made his appearance, it was in a thick morning coat, buttoned up to the chin, and with a Cashmere scarf round his throat. The Squire, who, for the sake of his visitor, and under Mrs. Dering's orders, was enduring a blazing wood fire (in a thorough draught), ran at once and shut up the windows. "We country people live with a good deal of air about us," he said, pausing before shutting out the last breath of fresh air; "but I suppose you——"

"Thank you, my dear sir; I certainly *do* prefer having as few draughts as possible," said Lord Petres, in his small mild voice. "In warm climates I can live out of doors like the natives, but in England it seems to me the outer air can never be safely breathed except under the condition of violent bodily exercise, for which, I am sorry to say, I have no strength."

He seated himself beside the fire, warming his thin blue-veined hands, and looking ready for any martyrdom that might be in store for him. The Squire came back to the hearthrug, and began shifting from one foot to another, in utter perplexity as to how he should tell this poor little dyspeptic, melancholy guest of his that he must be married before autumn! If he had only got Arabella's list in his hand, he thought, he might do it. Something of Arabella's delicate tact might be infused into him by the sight of the different items jotted down in her firm, clear handwriting. But, of course, it would

never do to show such tangible proof of female tutelage as this ; so, after struggling with himself for a minute or two, and getting so red that Lord Petres, who was silently watching him, thought he was going to have a fit of apoplexy—the Nemesis of all the underdone meats such a man must have eaten during his life ! the Squire burst, apropos of nothing, into the following question : “ And—and when do you talk of the marriage coming off, then, Lord Petres ? ”

Lord Petres stroked down his small black whiskers with his small delicate fingers ; put his head slightly on one side, and surveyed the Squire with feeble wonder. “ Marriage ! ” he repeated, plaintively. “ My dear Mr. Hilliard, do I hear you aright ?—marriage ? ”

“ Hang the man, and hang everything belonging to him ! ” thought the Squire, pettishly. “ What else should I mean ? Yes, Lord Petres, *marriage*. I—I—the fact is, I’m afraid your health isn’t what it ought to be, and we thought, perhaps, if you spent the winter in a warmer climate, Tangiers, now—no, that isn’t it ! where the deuce was it ? well, never mind—that’s neither here nor there—a warmer climate, at all events.”

A warmer climate. Here was something definite, at least : something Arabella had told him ; something inoffensive to Lord Petres, and uncompromising of Kate ; and Mr. Hilliard was determined to stick to it. “ Yes, a warmer climate,” he repeated, putting his hands behind him, and looking up at the ceiling with the air of a man who knows his duty, and who has every intention of performing it.

“ But why Tangiers ? ” said Lord Petres. “ I’m grateful, very, to any one who takes an interest in my miserable state, and any data respecting the sanitary influence of different climates is of value to me ; but why Tangiers ? ”

“ I don’t say that it was Tangiers,” said the Squire ; “ I’m not up in these invalid places—thank God ! England was always a good enough climate for me. As you suffer so at home, even in weather like this, we thought some warmer place would set you up for next winter, and . . . and—in that case—we would see if we couldn’t manage to have the wedding over by autumn.”

Lord Petres sat motionless, slowly opening and shutting his eyes, and looking as if he were conscientiously trying to let the meaning

of the extraordinary proposal he had just heard gain egress to his brain. It was evident at last that he had to give up the attempt in despair. "The stupidity that besets me of a morning is not a good sign—not at all a good sign," he said, shaking his head mournfully. "Bright ascribes it to some abnormal irritation of the pneumogastric nerves, and tells me it is not unfrequently a forerunner of paralysis—which is cheering. Now you will think it incredible when I tell you that I do not yet understand about Tangiers. Is it considered a good climate for persons—to speak frankly, Mr. Hilliard—for persons labouring under a complication of bronchial and dyspeptic disorders, like mine? and what—you must pardon me still more—is the connection, from a climatic point of view, between Tangiers and marriage?"

"He is a fool," thought the Squire; "a hopeless, hypochondriacal idiot; and the plainer you speak to such a man the better. My dear Lord Petres, you must be aware that as regards your engagement to Kate, I can have only one feeling?" Lord Petres' face was as the face of a statue. "I married her mother when the child was little, and I believe I've done my duty by her as if she had been my own. Well, Kate's one-and-twenty now, and sensible enough to judge for herself in the matter of choosing a husband. My opinion has not been asked—no, my opinion has *not* been asked," said the Squire, rather huskily; "and all I have got to do for poor Kate is a mere matter of business. Her mother and sister seem to think the engagement has lasted long enough, Lord Petres, and—and—they wished me to speak to you about it."

All Lord Petres' affectation of stupidity vanished as if by magic. The honest physical evidences of heat and nervousness upon the Squire's face, his earnest voice, his trembling lip as he spoke of Katharine, appealed to the blasé little man of the world as no tortuous circumlocution of a more clever diplomatist, like Mrs. Dering, would ever have done. The good, fussy Squire was acting, he could see, under orders, and under protest; acting, for very certain, without Kate's knowledge, and not in the smallest degree from any personal eagerness of his own to forward the marriage. From the moment in which Mrs. Dering first let him know that his attentions were

serious until the present, Lord Petres had never really swerved for one instant from his loyalty to Katharine. Marriage would be a serious blow to him, he felt ; the loss of Duclos a more serious blow still ; but Kate was the one woman on earth who could best make up to him for all he would be called upon to sacrifice. Besides, Utopian though he might be in principle, Lord Petres, as I have before said, was perfectly old-fashioned and conservative in the ordering of his own life. He voted with his party in politics ; attended the services of the church to which he hereditarily belonged ; and had always felt, whatever his theoretic convictions on the subject of marriage, that it would be incumbent upon him personally to marry before he died. So now, enormously to the Squire's relief, his future stepson rose up, gave him a friendly little shake of the hand, thanked him for the kind interest he was showing in him, both as regarded his health and his domestic happiness, and expressed the delight it would afford him (seating himself by the fire again, as he said this, and vainly trying to look cheerful) to have a near day fixed for the wedding.

Talk about money followed, in the easiest way in the world. Lord Petres' ideas of settlements were more liberal than anything that Mrs. Dering had bid the Squire stipulate for. So much jointure in the event of his death—to be unaltered by any second marriage of Katharine's ; so much pin-money ; and Kate's own small fortune (for Katharine was an heiress to the extent of five thousand pounds, left her a year or two ago by her godmother) to be exclusively her own, of course. And radiant with satisfaction at having got over this part of his work so well, the Squire was just noting down some memento of his success in his pocket-book at Lord Petres' side, when Katharine herself, fresh as the morning, and with her arms full of flowers, opened the glass door that led from the breakfast-room to the garden. Her eyes were dazzled still by the bright sunshine in which she had been standing ; and for a moment she walked on, unconscious that she was not alone, and singing under her voice the "*Apparvi alla luce*" that she had last listened to with Steven at the opera.

"Ahem ! Kate, my love !" cried the Squire, putting his pocket-

book behind him, then dropping it into his pocket with as frightened a feeling as if he had been detected in plotting a forgery. "Why, Kate, you're looking as blooming as your own roses. What—what time is it, my dear?" The consciousness of his guilt made the Squire stammer and turn red.

"What time?" said Katharine, looking quickly, first at Mr. Hilliard's face, then at Lord Petres'. "Well, papa, as the clock is precisely opposite to you, I should think you might tell! It is exactly seventeen minutes and a half to one."

"Seventeen minutes to one!" cried the Squire, seizing up his hat, which stood on a side-table, and making a hasty retreat towards the window, "and I promised to see old Elliot at noon! Lord Petres, if you will excuse me, I must run away. If the afternoon is warm enough I wish you would come down and look at my Guernsey heifer—Kate you will know where to find me?"

The moment the lovers were alone Kate tossed down her heap of flowers on the table, and came up to Lord Petres' side. "You are looking worried," she said. "What is the matter? what has papa been saying to you?"

Lord Petres turned his eyes up to Katharine's sweet summer face, and felt a really epicurean regret that he could not be more in love with her. He took her hand, her cool hand, round which the scent of carnations and daphnes clung yet, and kissed it. "Mr. Hilliard has been talking to me of a great many things; Tangiers, among the rest. You and I are going to Tangiers, Kate."

"I hope not, Lord Petres."

"We are going there this winter. It is a great climate, Mr. Hilliard tells me, for invalids of my class, and as I refuse to be banished alone, you must just go with me, Katharine!"

"And what will Monsieur Duclos do?"

"Oh, the time has passed for thinking of Duclos," answered Lord Petres. "As our friend Lawrence says—are there no other French cooks to be had in the world besides Duclos?"

Something in the seriousness of his face or the mention of Steven, or both, made Katharine change colour. "What has papa been talking about?" she cried hastily. "Now, I insist upon knowing!"

"We have been talking about fixing our wedding-day, Kate," and all this time Lord Petres held her hand in his. "These long delays are very well for you, but at my age, and in my precarious state, I naturally grudge every month which——"

"Enables Duclos to remain with you?" interrupted Katharine, as Lord Petres' inability to speak anything but the truth made him hesitate. "I know quite well what all this means, Lord Petres? Bella has been giving us her advice. You and papa, indeed! As if you are not, both of you, much too fond of me to originate such a cabal! Bella, because her own engagement was a short one, thinks she is to impose her example upon us. She shall do no such thing. Courtship, all poets and novel-writers agree, is the best part of life; then I say let the best part be eked out as long as possible. Tangiers, too! You and I in Tangiers!"

Katharine Fane's laugh had never sounded so musical as it did at this moment to Lord Petres' ears. The breaking-up of his life, the departure of Duclos, all seemed reprieved indefinitely to him by the ring of that girlish, heart-whole laugh. "You are very cruel!" he said. "After leaving Paris in the pleasantest June I ever saw there, after risking my health by travelling about in this inclement climate——"

"And after hoping to go, as a married man, to Tangiers, to be sentenced to a longer term of bachelor misery in Paris and London! Oh, Lord Petres, I am so sorry for you!"

"Show it, Kate."

"How?"

He drew her to his side, and—for about the third time since their engagement—touched her cheek with his pale lips. Mrs. Dering, who was passing before the window, happened just then to look in upon them; and a hot thrill of shame and indignation and self-contempt passed suddenly through Katharine's heart.

Until this moment she had never fully and thoroughly realized that the play had a meaning in it: that little Lord Petres would one day be Katharine Fane's husband!

CHAPTER XX.

COFFEE ON THE TERRACE.

THE dinner-party that evening was not remarkable for its brilliancy. Lord Petres in the course of the afternoon had had his hand pressed by Mrs. Dering with a sisterly warmth that he could not hide from himself was fraught with cruellest significance for the future ; he had also been conducted through long grass to see the Squire's heifers, and had got his feet damp ; and throughout the last twenty-four hours had partaken only of nourishment prepared by a "good plain" English cook. Could it be wondered at if Lord Petres' eyes looked more glassy, his white face more resigned and melancholy than usual, during the entire festivity—a festivity which, like the death-feasts of the Indians, was being celebrated, he knew, in mocking honour of himself, the victim destined hereafter for immolation. Katharine, who looked mortally wearied with everybody, sat between her lover and the rector, saying yes and no at hazard, and as the evening wore on giving many furtive glances across the lawn towards the terrace ; the point where Steven Lawrence was accustomed at this hour of sunset to appear. Mrs. Dering talked, and talked well, as usual ; she was a woman whose special vocation it was to supply admirable small talk under all accidents or changes of human life ; but with the best will in the world, one person, unsupported, can scarcely furnish adequate conversation for a dinner-party of seven. The rector, piqued at the onset of dinner by Katharine's treatment of one of his best stories, confined himself silently to eating and drinking for the remainder of the meal ; and Lord Haverstock (a tall, indefinitely-coloured creature, aquiline-nosed, good-humoured eyed, and with an inch and a half of forehead) was so horribly frightened at finding himself next to Dot—the poor boy was always frightened to death by every young woman higher in rank than a barmaid—that he never opened his lips except in scared monosyllables from the moment he began his soup until the ladies had left the table.

"Such are little sociable dinners," said Katharine, when at length,

with her sister and Dot, she had made her escape to the garden. "How intensely stupid it all was ! How intensely stupid men are ! How wise mamma was to have a headache, and keep in her own room !"

"I don't think it was at all stupid, Kate," said Mrs. Dering. "It just seemed to me one of those pleasant friendly parties where people talk or are silent as they like. How wonderfully good-looking the rector is, and how Lord Haverstock has improved !"

Kate gave a little dry laugh. "Improved ! What can Lord Haverstock have been like in his former state, if in his present one he is improved ? Now suppose he wasn't Lord Haverstock at all, but a son of Mills the horse-dealer, what should we say of him, I wonder, with his horsey look and slang expressions, when he does open his lips—and his awkwardness and stupidity ?"

Mrs. Dering was too wise, and too well pleased with the success of her own diplomacy, to attempt to contradict any of Katharine's radical opinions to-night. "Poor Lord Haverstock ! he is certainly not over-brilliant or over-handsome ; but how charming your new rector is ! I had not seen him before. No wonder he has made you a convert to Anglicanism, Katharine !"

"If he is always as eloquent as he was to day, I should think his life would be spent in making converts," said Katharine. "Did he speak a dozen words from the beginning of dinner till its close ?"

"Well, my opinion is that everybody was so silent because they had a kind of wedding-breakfast cloud hanging over them !" cried Dot incisively. "The coming event begins to cast its shadow before. As I looked at you, Kate, sitting in your white dress at Lord Petres' side, I could quite have imagined that we were assisting already at the marriage-feast."

"That I can very well believe," said Katharine, quietly. "Lord Petres looked miserable enough, even for a bridegroom, I am sure. I must tell him seriously by-and-by, that I have no more intention of being married now than I ever had. Something besides the country and the bad cooking is telling on the poor little fellow's spirits, I am sure."

Mrs. Dering laughed, and affected to treat this remark of her

sister's as a pleasantry ; but a few minutes later she put her hand within Katharine's arm, and managed to get her away to the terrace-walk, out of Dot's hearing. "I have not had an opportunity to speak to you before, Kate," she whispered. "How glad, how very glad I am, dearest, to think that everything is settled!"

"Settled? as regards what, Bella?"

"Ah, don't jest, Katharine, when you are alone with me—settled as regards your approaching marriage! Lord Petres spoke to me this morning, and wants it to be very soon, and was most liberal—but we won't even talk of that. Come Kate," said Mrs. Dering affectionately, "don't pretend to me that you and Lord Petres are not thoroughly d'accord in everything."

"I should say," said Katharine, speaking slowly and with deliberation, "that Lord Petres and I are 'd'accord,' as you call it, is nothing. Oh, I know what you would remind me of," she cried, as Mrs. Dering was about to interrupt her, and with an almost painful blush rising over her face. "You looked in through the window to-day, and you saw that Lord Petres kissed me; I believe it was the second time he ever did so, Bella! Some great ceremonial of the kind took place when we were first told that we were engaged, and I didn't mind it much then. I never even thought of love in those days. I mean, I mean—oh, dear me," and she turned and looked wistfully into her sister's face; "I don't think I ever *can* marry Lord Petres!"

Whatever Mrs. Dering felt, she was, outwardly, thorough mistress of the situation. "All girls think much the same," she answered soothingly. "I am sure I thought a dozen, a hundred times, before I married General Dering, that I did not really care enough for him, yet you see how happy I am Kate!"

"I am a very different woman to you, Bella—"

"You are a woman," said Mrs. Dering, "exactly suited to the position in which Lord Petres can place you. Let us talk sense, not sentiment, Kate! You are a woman fond of society, and of shining there, fond of London, fond, in a restricted sense, of the country; fond of everything cultivated and refined in life; and all this can be given through money alone. Besides, Katharine," she added

gravely, "although it is a subject in which my conscience forbids me to sympathize, I cannot but feel that your holding, in your heart, the religious opinions which Lord Petres professes openly, is an immense tie to bind you together. If I could think, if I could hope," cried Mrs. Dering, "that there was a chance of your abandoning what I must ever hold to be Romish error, I should feel differently. But I do not think this. I believe you sincere in your religion, as you are in everything else, Kate, and I am sufficiently free from narrow-mindedness to rejoice that you are to marry a Catholic. What chance of earthly happiness can there be," said Mrs. Dering, solemnly, "unless married people think alike on the sacred subject that outweighs all others?"

Every word in this long speech was well chosen. Katharine knew that she did like society, and shining in society; London, country, and everything else that money could give. Still, had Mrs. Dering stopped here, her arguments had been insufficient. What were these things worth, Katharine would have asked, when they came to be weighed against the sweet liberty which she must surrender to gain them? But the vision of returning to the church of her predilection and her birth—of being in a position to give that faith substantial support—was one that during the last eighteen months had lain very near to Katharine Fane's heart.

A child of seven when her mother remarried (and from indolence, and the distance of the Dene from a Roman Catholic chapel, and the love of being a martyr, combined, went over to the Squire's faith), Katharine, a stout little Papist already, had obstinately rebelled from the first against exchanging her blue rosary, and pretty prayers to the Virgin, for Mrs. Trimmer and the church catechism as broken up and made easy by Pinnock. Clithero church and its services seemed hideous and bare, indeed, after the glittering convent chapel in which the child had been accustomed to hear mass at York: the chapel with windows that cast rainbow pictures upon an inlaid floor; and paintings of Mother and Child, and soft-eyed saints around the walls; and crucifix and snow-white lilies upon the altar; and even the roof covered with blue clouds and gilded stars and angel faces—always specially smiling down on little Kate.

"I like my new papa, and I like my pony," the child said, trying to be just ; "but I don't like being a Protestant. I like chapel because they sing, and have pictures, and swing incense there. I like to watch the serving boys ; I like to see the silver cross and the little pink roses on Father Austin's back, and I *hate* Clithero church, and the ugly old man in a white gown ! And when I am a woman I'll go to chapel again like my own papa did."

Time, and the irresistible weight of example, made the child a Protestant, of course ; that is to say, she fretted after the blue beads no more ; and she said (aloud) the formulas she was taught to say, and did not behave worse than other children of her age at the parish church. Arabella, who even at this early age was a young person swayed by her reason rather than emotions, had been brought without much difficulty to see that living in a Protestant neighbourhood, and under the roof of a Protestant stepfather, the tenets of Popery were errors that it was good taste for her to abjure. And whatever Arabella, at her advanced time of life, and with her superior wisdom did, Kate, poor little soul ! felt could not be very wrong for her to do likewise. Still, the poetry, the fragrance of the old religion was never really crushed out from her memory. If her new home, instead of being the Dene, had been Ashcot ; if the worship, which was to replace the glitter and sweet incense and sweet music of the mass had been the worship of Shiloh, a very few months would probably have sufficed to turn Katharine into just as staunch a Wesleyan as she had once been a Papist. She was a warm, passionate-natured little creature ; craving to love, craving to be loved in return by men and women, but also by the good saints and by heaven ! And, notwithstanding their lack of outside beauty, the familiar hymns, the homely services of Shiloh had, I think, sufficient real human heartiness in them to have filled the simple measure of a child's soul.

As it was, the religion they told her to give up was replaced—I may say it boldly—by none. The Squire's whole kindly life was, in truth, religion put into practice ; and to him, instinct-guided, Kate clung. But the Squire was a man darkly ignorant as to theological differences. A Papist, a Unitarian, a Quaker, might each, without

detriment to his belief, have had Mr. Hilliard for an associate. He had taken very little part in his wife's conversion ; none at all in the hiding away of Kate's blue beads. The Church of England was the faith into which he himself had been born, and in which he meant to die ; and he went regularly to church, and repeated the responses, and listened (a little beyond the text) to the sermon on Sunday ; and dined at two o'clock for the sake of the servants ; and never broke the sanctity of the day otherwise than by furtively taking his long spud and digging up weeds in retired parts of the garden of an afternoon. From Monday morning till Saturday night he thought of nothing higher than his mangels and heifers, and improving his land, and the condition of the poor who lived on it, with such other narrow interests and employments as immediately belonged to his narrow groove of life. And, young as she was, little Kate soon felt that the Squire, except in sickness, regarded the mention of any sacred name or subject on a week day as a sort of sacrilege.

Once, and once only, they were very happy picking peas together in the kitchen garden, she had asked him if he "understood why" the cock should have crowed just at the right time to reprove St. Peter?

"I understand nothing, my dear—not as much as why the peas grow sideways in the pods," said the Squire. "What you and I have got to mind, Kate, is, to do our duty at all times, and believe what the parson tells us in church of a Sunday."

And this answer had been sufficient to warn the child for ever off all controversial or doctrinal ground, so far as her stepfather was concerned.

From her mother, the only allusion she ever heard to a life higher than one of medicine-taking and novel-reading, was when Mrs. Hilliard would plaintively murmur of how she had given up her own personal welfare, temporal and eternal, for her children's sake. A statement which, coming from a human creature lying on a luxurious sofa, and with as much calf's foot jelly as she chose to eat at her side, was too mysterious and awful to bear much real significance to a child's mind. Arabella, until her marriage, never exhibited any fruits of Protestant belief more convincing than the possession of a

purple velvet church-service, which Kate was not allowed to touch; and Dot, when Dot appeared on the scene, was frankly and without affectation a pagan.

"You fret to be Catholique once more?" Dora had said in the early days of her arrival, and when Kate, relying on her cousin's childish appearance for sympathy, had bared to her the state of her conscience. "Bah! they are one so good as ze other. Catholique in Paris—Protestant in England! Go—what matters it?"

These had been the spiritual influences of Katharine's life; the influences which had so signally failed to efface the convent chapel with its gilded shrine and snow-white lilies, its solemn mass and plaintive nun-chanted Litanies, from her heart!

Into the intrinsic truth or error of conflicting creeds she had, I must confess, not striven to penetrate very far. Katharine Fane was not what many people call "intellectual," and her active out-of-door habits—varied latterly by a few weeks' unresting London excitement during the season—left her little time for theological, or, indeed, for deep studies of any kind. Her ideal of life had always been that it should be thoroughly enjoyable and picturesque; a life in which everybody, rich and poor, should love Katharine Fane! a life made up of flowers and sunshine; pictures, music, pretty things of all sorts; with a picturesque religion (the old church seemed such an one to her) to correspond. And until the last few weeks the possibility of existence yielding more than such facile inch-deep happiness, had never troubled Katharine's imagination. She was handsome and young, and could make everybody think as she liked; and when she was Lady Petres she would restore the old Catholic chapel down at Eccleston, and go back openly to the church herself, and have a chaplain with a pathetic voice to say mass, and convert all the Protestant poor on her husband's estates, and found a convent in which Dot, if she did not marry, might take refuge. This had been her dream; this, as Mrs. Dering well knew, was the rock of strength on which Katharine's fidelity to her engagement rested.

"You know that what I say is true, Kate. You know that for every reason your marriage with Lord Petres will be an excellent one—and if you would only listen to me, if you would only have a

little more faith in my experience, you would not delay your engagement too long. Dora, from what she tells me, is likely to be married before the winter, and I really do not see what but perversity can make you wish to remain at home after she is gone."

Katharine turned her head impatiently aside from her sister. Far away across the purple bay she could see a dark spot upon the water; and her heart told her that it was Steven's boat.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Dering, in her measured voice; "there is, I suppose, no longer any doubt about it. The young man is here, Dora says, every day of his life; and, of course, all that we can do now is to bear the *mésalliance* with the best grace possible. What do you say, Kate?"

"I say nothing, Bella. I'm stupid, and out of spirits, I think—at all events, I don't mean to talk about any more love affairs, if I can help it, to night."

"What! not when your favourite Steven is the hero? Surely you have not lost your interest in him already, dear Katharine?"

Dear Katharine continued silently to watch the boat and the figure in it as both grew gradually more and more distinct! and Mrs. Dering, after vainly waiting some minutes for a reply, took herself off in despair to Dot, who, very sylvan-looking in a pale green muslin dress, and with a natural rose in her short hair, was arranging cups and saucers on a rustic table at the other end of the terrace.

"It has taken ten years to make Uncle Frank consent to have coffee out of doors in hot weather," said Dot, "but I have got my own way about it at last. What is the good of having a garden, and terraces, and natural flowers, I say, unless one uses them? English people declare they like the country—perhaps they do, in a cow-like ruminating fashion—but they certainly don't know how to enjoy it: no not half as much as the smallest Parisian shopkeeper, who, all through the fine season, goes and drinks his coffee out of doors in the Bois."

"Possibly English people can enjoy the country without eating and drinking out of doors," remarked Mrs. Dering, sententiously. "English people don't pretend, you must remember, to be always turning life into *fête-days*, like the French——"

"They don't indeed!" interrupted Dora. "The worse for those whose lot it is to live among them!"

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Dering, "when you have a home—a nice little rural home of your own, you will be able to take your coffee out of doors every evening of your life, and play at fête-days, and fancy yourself in France again as much as you like! At all events," she added, "I am glad to think, Dora, that you are beginning to talk of enjoying country pleasures in any form. If, as you tell me, you allow Mr. Steven Lawrence to come here every day of the week, there is not much doubt, I suppose, what your future life is going to be?"

"I allow?" cried Dot, with one of her mocking laughs. "Katharine allows, you mean. I told you Steven Lawrence came here every evening, as regularly as the sun sets, and so he does—but not for me. I never take to myself attentions meant in reality for others, Bella, dear! At first the poor fellow used to try and find excuses for coming so often. He had a message for the Squire, or the weather was so fine he thought the young ladies would like to go out a bit in his boat, but now he comes daily and with no excuse at all. Comes to see Kate, bien entendu, and Kate alone; and thinks about as much of me as he does of Zuleika."

"It is impossible he can think of anybody *but* you," said Mrs. Dering, with calm incredulity. "Quite impossible; from the little I saw of him in town I should judge Steven Lawrence to be a thoroughly sensible young man. He feels shy, no doubt, at first, and addresses himself to Kate rather than you, until he can be sure what ground he stands upon."

Dot gave a meaning little shrug of the shoulders by way of reply, and just at this moment the Squire, with Lord Haverstock and the rector—all looking as picturesque as men generally do in black suits and white ties—made their appearance on the terrace, followed, after an interval, by Lord Petres, wrapped up as usual, and with his French valet bearing an immense seal-skin rug and a heap of Scotch plaids behind.

"You are quite right to take precautions, Lord Petres," said Mrs.

Dering ; Katharine who had slowly sauntered up having asked him if he was going to Siberia. "However fine the weather looks, I never believe myself that the evening air is not really damp before August. Thanks," as Lord Petres offered her a share in the seal-skin. "Fond as I am of the country and everything belonging to it, I must confess that I prefer sitting on a good thick fur to the damp ground. Kate, dear, there is room still for you."

"Thank you, Bella," said Katharine, "it makes me quite warm enough to look at you both ;" for Mrs. Dering, with fine appreciation of furs in July, had seated herself at her future brother-in-law's side. "In weather like this the colder and damper everything feels the better, I say. Isn't the sea blue to-night, Lord Haverstock ? doesn't the very look of it always make you wish you were there ?"

The very sound of a lady's voice, propounding a direct question to himself, always startled Lord Haverstock to an extent that made him wish himself in truth at the very bottom of the sea. But feeling that it was an occasion on which something complimentary might be expected of him, the poor boy answered, after shifting about his large hands and feet in tortures of shyness, that he thought perhaps it was very pleasant here, that is to say, he didn't know, really, whether it was possible for a fellow to be better off than they all were now, but certainly——"

"I have often thought, Miss Fane," said the rector, speaking in the well-trained well-pitched tone that always so fatally reminded Katharine of some one reading aloud out of an improving book ; "I have often thought how the view of the sea from your terrace reminds one of bits of the Mediterranean: flowers at one's feet, evergreens growing close down to the water, the smooth blue bay beyond, the distant line of coast which, fancy aiding somewhat, might be Ischia or Capri, the——"

"What, Steven !" interrupted Dot's ringing voice, amidst a little clatter of the coffee cups : "I declare you looked just like the figure in Don Giovanni, rising up suddenly in that spectre-like way from nowhere ! Arabella — Mr. Lawrence — Katharine dear, here is Steven."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FARM GARDEN.

THE sun, which during the last quarter of an hour had been hidden behind a bank of low-lying violet cloud, threw out his last ray before setting at this moment ; and the light shone full upon Steven Lawrence's figure, as he walked slowly up to the group of people on the terrace.

He was dressed in his accustomed yeoman fashion ; not in any of the fashionable clothes made for him by Lord Petres' London tailor ; a light velveteen suit, drab gaiters, a coloured handkerchief knotted round his throat, a wide-awake hat, with a bit of clover stuck in its ribbon ; dressed no better, save in the fineness of his linen, than any of the well-to-do workmen or gardeners about the Squire's grounds ; but bearing, thought Katharine, in his handsome face and graceful "savage" mien, far more of nature's unconscious nobility than did young Lord Haverstock, or her own poor little pallid lover, or even the Oxford-trained rector, with his ultra air of refinement and artificial self-occupied voice and manner.

She stood silent, actually with a blush—a *blush* upon her cheeks ! Mrs. Dering noted, until Steven had shaken hands with the men of the party, and talked for a minute or so to Dora, who began calling him Steven at once—evidently quite ready to exhibit her intimacy with him before the world—then crossed over to the table, and to Mrs. Dering's growing dissatisfaction, poured out a cup of coffee for him with her own hand.

"Dear Kate is so impulsive !" she whispered, interrupting Lord Petres in some information he was solemnly giving her as to the best way of dressing ortolans. "So good-hearted ! Everything she does is done so thoroughly—too thoroughly, perhaps—on the spur of the moment !"

"I thought you were not going to look at me, at all," said Katharine, as she stood at Steven's side. "You spoke to papa, and Lord Petres and Dora—to every one, in short, but me. What is it like at sea to-night ?"

"It is calm but fresh," answered Steven; "fresher than when I took you and Miss Dora out the other night."

"I have a great mind to propose an adjournment there now," cried Katharine. "It would be a wonderfully pleasant change for everybody, I am sure!" with a little tired sigh.

"The boat would not hold everybody," said Steven, matter-of-fact, as usual. "As I came along, I confess I thought I might tempt you and Miss Dora to come out, but now I see that I am too late."

"Too late! and why too late?" said Katharine, the consciousness that Mrs. Dering was listening to them urging her onward. "As far as I am concerned, I say frankly, I should like nothing better—that is, if some of the others will go too. Dot, what do you say? Will you come out for a row in Mr. Lawrence's boat? Now I am sure you would enjoy it."

But Dot, mindful of the fleeting nature of green muslin, and not wholly forgetful of young Lord Haverstock, had no inclination for boating. She was quite sure there was a swell; decidedly more swell at all events than there had been the other evening, and even then she felt frightened; and perhaps it would get dark suddenly! Nothing she had such a horror of as being out, en pleine mer, in the dark. So Katharine addressed herself to Mrs. Dering.

"Mr. Lawrence offers to take some of us out in his boat, Bella. There is room, I think, for four. Will you come? No. Then you will, Lord Petres? Oh, indeed you must, the fresh air out in the bay will do you a world of good."

But after talking about marriage settlements in the morning, walking over damp grass to see heifers in the afternoon, and finally dining off a "good plain" English dinner, in commemoration of his own approaching wedding, the eloquence of the most beautiful lips in the world would not have made Lord Petres conclude his day in the country by voluntarily encountering more damp and misery, and discomfort of every kind in a boat.

"I never go on any portion of the Channel, thank you, Kate, except that between Calais and Dover, and then my sufferings are so atrocious that I think on every occasion I cross it will be for the last time. We are the playthings of fate, Mrs. Dering," added Lord

Petres, as Mrs. Dering looked duly interested and sympathetic. "I often ask myself by what grim irony was I, with my defective organization, called into existence now, instead of a hundred years or so hence, when new methods of locomotion will have made steamers and sea-sickness things of the past."

"If new methods of locomotion are to do away with boating," said Katharine, "I, for one, would much sooner live out my poor morsel of existence now. Look at that smooth shining water, Lord Petres; who wouldn't sooner cross it in a trim little yacht at this moment than be impelled across in a monster balloon, or transmitted, perhaps, through a submarine tube like a parcel?"

"I think we are very much better on dry land than in a balloon or a boat either," put in Mrs. Dering; "we can see just as much of the shining water as we like—at a distance, and go into the house as soon as it gets cold."

"And in the meantime are at the height of a most important discussion on ortolans," said Lord Petres, gravely. "Kate, don't let our incapacity for maritime enjoyment keep you on shore. Lawrence will take every care of you, I know, and Mrs. Dering and I are in the middle of a conversation which will occupy us very pleasantly till you return."

Katharine hesitated. "If papa would come," she said, glancing at the Squire, who, in an eager undertone, was telling Lord Haverstock about the melancholy death of his prize-pig, from which so much had been expected: "Near upon four hundred-weight," Kate overheard him say, in a broken voice, "and gone in a moment, sir! gone like the snuff of a candle;" "but there is not much use in asking him. Papa."

"What, my dear?"

"Will you come with us on the water for an hour or so? Mr. Lawrence has brought his boat round, and I think it would be so cool and pleasant out in the bay."

"Then do you go, by all means, Kate," said Mr. Hilliard, who never troubled his head about chaperons or proprieties. "Lord Haverstock and I are content where we are. Yes, she was near upon four hundredweight, I assure you, and——"

"I believe ninety-nine people out of a hundred detest the sea!" cried Katharine, turning away to Steven. "If I want to go at all, I must go alone. Now, what about the tide? If we start at once, should I be able to get back in half an hour or so without walking ankle-deep across more than a mile of wet sand?"

"The tide has only just turned," said Steven. "You could be out for an hour—time enough to row to Seymour tower and back—and still get a good landing-place by the Beacon rock."

"Well, then, I make up my mind. I will go!" cried Katharine, resolutely; the more resolutely because her sister's face so plainly bade her stay where she was. "Who will lend me a wrap? Thanks, Bella," as Mrs. Dering, with the worse grace in the world, handed her a plaid from the heap of shawls that lay beside Lord Petres. "Now, Mr. Lawrence, let us start. If any one likes to follow us, so much the better; if not, we go alone."

She walked away with Steven down the terrace. Lord Petres turned his head slowly—being out of doors invariably gave him a stiff neck—and watched them.

"I am sure I've seen a picture like that somewhere," he remarked, with perfect amiability, to Mrs. Dering. "Dark trees; orange sky; grass terrace; sea in the back-ground; principal figures—graceful girl in white dress, looking up at handsome youth attired as game-keeper; handsome youth evidently embarrassed in his mind, and walking with his hands behind him at her side."

Mrs. Dering tried to look pleasant. "I believe I do remember some picture of the kind," she answered: "isn't it poor Queen Mary walking beside one of her jailors at Lochleven?"

"I think not," said Lord Petres. "The picture I speak of is one of modern manners, and the principal figures in it are young persons in the position of lovers. It was called 'Hearts Errant,' or, 'Hearts in Mortemaine,' or some other of those ridiculous names our English artists are so fond of choosing; but it was a very pretty picture, all the same, Mrs. Dering."

Just at this moment the "principal figures" had reached the flight of stone steps which led down from the terrace to the shore. "No one is coming," said Katharine, looking back. "There is Lord Petres

watching us," and she kissed her hand to him, "but not in the least meaning to follow ; and the rector talking to Dot ; and papa still intensely interested in telling poor Lord Haverstock about the pig. Now I am at liberty to enjoy myself. They are all perfectly well amused without us, and I feel I have done nothing inhospitable in leaving them."

She ran down the steps to the cove beneath the Squire's grounds, where Steven's little craft already lay, high and dry, upon the sand.

A few vigorous pulls from his stout arm soon brought the boat to, the water's edge, where Katharine got in, and then, wading knee-deep into the sea, Steven pushed the boat off, and jumped lightly into his place at the instant that she floated.

"You don't mind wet feet, I see," said Katharine, the vision of Lord Petres and of his horrors among the damp grass rising involuntarily before her as she spoke. "Oh, how deliciously cool it is here! how good it was of you to come for me ! I was afraid when you were so late you had forgotten all about us."

"At first I did mean to stay quiet at home stacking my hay," said Steven. "But, of course, my wishes got the better of my wisdom in the end, and I came——"

"Luckily for me," interrupted Katharine, a little hastily. "Mr. Lawrence, I think one must come fresh from a very stupid dinner-party in a very hot dining-room to appreciate really and thoroughly such blessed freedom as this ! Can silence ever be so golden as when for two mortal hours you have been listening to the wire-drawn conversation of six people all as heartily bored by each other as you were by them ?"

"I thought you all seemed to have plenty to say when I first saw you on the terrace—you and the parson especially," said Steven, with the look which Katharine understood so well coming round his lips.

"The parson ! our poor rector !" she answered. "He is so undeniably well-read, and well-mannered, and has such a musical voice, and still—still whatever he says (out of the pulpit) makes me inclined first to contradict him, next to fall asleep. How singularly

few people there are in the world who ever say anything worth listening to—are there not ?”

“Lord Petres seems to me a man who would always be worth listening to,” remarked Steven. “Whatever he says would always be new—to my comprehension, at least.”

“Ah yes, Lord Petres, certainly,” said Katharine. “I did not speak of him. You must remember Lord Petres never has anything to say to me when Mrs. Dering is present.”

She leant down her head—its drooping graceful outline showed clear, like an antique bronze, against the yellow sunset—and let one of her hands dip into the transparent water as the steady stroke of Steven’s sculls, helped by the ebbing tide, bore the little boat fast away from the shore. Neither of them spoke again till they were well out in the bay ; then Steven rested on his sculls, and Katharine lifted up her face almost with a start. The sun in these ten minutes had sunk beneath the horizon ; the distant plantations of the Dene, the terrace, and the people on the terrace, all had become dusk and indistinct, like the scenery in a dream. The only things vivid to Miss Fane were Steven’s face and the sense that they were alone under this tender flush of sky, and with the sea, beating like one vast heart, murmuring like one vast whisper of love, for their companion.

She faltered a word or two about its being late, then added something, but of a very indistinct and hazy nature, about Mrs. Dering and Lord Petres.

“Mrs. Dering and Lord Petres are well wrapped up in furs, and talking about ortolans,” said Steven. His tone was changed, Katharine detected. It was firmer, less pleading than it had ever been with her before. “There is not the slightest need for you to return to them yet. I dare say I shall never ask another favour of you after to-night,” he added ; “don’t refuse to stay out a little longer with me now.”

“I—oh, I was only thinking about the tide,” said Katharine. “As long as you undertake to put me safely on dry land in half an hour or so it is all right. Look, there is the moon’s light coming up behind Seymour tower already, just like a scene at the opera, as Dot says when she means to be unusually complimentary to nature.”

She spoke lightly ; yet there was something in her voice that might have told an acute observer she was not thoroughly at her ease. Steven, however, did not seem to notice it.

"We will keep in the course of Seymour tower still," he said after a few minutes' steady rowing ; "then drift with the back-current round to the slip at Ashcot. You have never seen my house and garden from the sea, Miss Fane ? Well, I've a fancy to take you there—a fancy that you should walk once round the old garden with me to-night. Will you come ?"

Katharine took out her watch, the hands of which it was already too dark to distinguish. "If I was quite sure about the tide," she began.

"Oh, I undertake everything about the tide," interrupted Steven, quickly. "I promised to land you at the Beacon rock, and so I will. You will be at many more dinner-parties," he added, "but such an hour as this may never come to me again, remember, while I live !"

It was a glorious hour ; earth, sea, and heaven bathed in such subtle minglement of the hues of day and night as living painter could never be rash enough to imitate. Across the dawning moon-rise floated fleecy vapours, sun-tinged from the west ; on the western side of Seymour tower, an old Martello fort that could be reached at low spring-tide across the rocks, a deep red glow yet lingered, while its eastern outline was already tipped with silver. Delicate hosts of pearl and crimson covered half the sky. Within shelter of Clithero bay a fleet of fishing-boats lay so motionless that not a ripple broke their long reflections. The polished water rose and fell against the boat with a lazy rippling cadence, just one degree more lulling to the ear than the stillness of perfect calm.

As she looked back across the bay towards home, where darkness was now fast growing in the hollows of the shore, and where the ridge of fir plantations on Clithero hill smote black upon the pale primrose sky beyond, it seemed to Katharine Fane as though she had left all gloom and night behind her for ever ; as though light and hope and rosy promise for to-morrow were here, away from Lord Petres, away from everything belonging to her old life, and with Steven !

The strong back-current drifted them so easily along their course now, that only an occasional stroke of the sculls was needed to keep the boat in its right track ; and before Katharine could seriously reflect that they were getting more and more out of the direction of home, they were lying alongside of the slip ; a primitive stone jetty which had been constructed, the Lawrences said, for fishing, their enemies in old days, for smuggling purposes, but conveniently close, at all events, to a moss-grown arched porchway which opened on the other side of the narrow road into the garden of Ashcot farm.

Steven jumped ashore, and in a minute had made the boat fast by a chain to one of the staples on the slip ; then he returned, and without a word offered Miss Fane his hand.

"It is hardly worth while for me to get out," she said ; but as she spoke she put her hand in his, and left the boat. "I ought to be back already. Mr. Lawrence, really and in earnest, I must not be here five minutes."

"All right," said Steven, "in five minutes you shall return. I only want—a foolish fancy, isn't it ?—that you should take one walk round my garden in the moonlight to-night. It's kept up in a different fashion to the gardens you are accustomed to see : " saying this he pushed open the ponderous old gate for Katharine to enter : "a different fashion, even, to what it was in my young days ; but I believe I like it as it is. Thanks to Barbara, there are no weeds, at least ; and homely flowers smell as sweet as hot-house ones on an evening like this."

Katharine had never in her life before been inside the Lawrence's gates ; had never seen the farm garden nearer than from the five-acres, across which Steven had led her in that lingering "short cut " of yesterday. Its quaint old-world air, its old-fashioned borders, with their bushes of lavender and rosemary, their plots of tall white lilies, cottage marigolds, and sweet-smelling flox, made her love the place on the instant : for, in spite of a Scotch head-gardener and her own knowledge of Latin names, there was still a good deal of poetry left in Katharine's heart—about flowers.

"The plants I brought from America are on the other side of the house," said Steven ; "but it's too dark to ask you to look at them

to-night. You must turn to the left, please, under the mulberry tree—that is if you can find room to get along.”

And going on first, he held aside the dark over-arching boughs for Miss Fane to pass ; then led her away by a narrow path to the end of the garden farthest from the house. Steven would sooner have confronted most things than old Barbara at this moment, and with one of the gentry by his side.

. . . . A low stone wall, some three or four feet in height ; a group of laurel, cypress, and bay, overhung by a solitary silver beech : a distant expanse of sand and rock : a great star trembling through the purple overhead—When was Katharine Fane to cease from being haunted by recollections of that scene ?

“What a dear old garden !” she said, her face upturned to Steven’s. “What a pleasant place to dream alone in of a summer’s evening ! I have always thought a great deal of our terrace at home till now, but I like this sea-walk of yours better. How still it is here ! how far away we seem to have got from all the rest of the world !”

“This is my favourite walk,” said Steven. “When it is lighter you can see straight across the bay to the Dene, and every night after work is over I smoke my pipe here—exactly at the spot where you are standing. Sit down for a minute or two—won’t you ? This angle of the wall, with the beech-tree for a support, doesn’t make a bad arm-chair.”

His tone had changed more and more, and Katharine’s heart beat quick. “I’m afraid I shan’t be able to stay now,” she hesitated ; “but another time, if you will let me come, with papa and Dora——”

“Another time is no time,” said Steven. “Miss Fane, how can you be unkind enough to refuse me ? Surely, your guests will be able to spare you for a short five minutes longer ?”

“My guests ? oh, I did not think of them,” answered Katharine. “I was thinking as I generally do, of myself alone.”

“You have had enough of Ashcot already, then ?”

“Indeed, I haven’t. I could stand here looking at the sea for hours. I mean—I——”

She faltered—stopped short ; and again the faint lapping of the tide, or fitful sweeps of wind among the beech-boughs, alone broke

the delicious calm of the misty, sea-scented air. After a time—almost with a shiver : “How late it must be growing!” cried Katharine. “The five minutes are over now, Mr. Lawrence, and I must really go. It is getting cold. Mamina would not like me to be out so late.”

“Cold!” said Steven, who was carrying the plaid upon his arm ; “why, of course, you are cold in that thin dress, and I—selfish as I always am—did not remember it before.” And coming to her side he unfolded the shawl, and began to wrap it, gipsy-fashion, around her head and shoulders.

“Please don’t stifle me,” said Katharine, trying to laugh. “I don’t want to catch cold, but I should like to be able to breathe a very little, all the same. Now, if I only had a pin—hold the plaid so, one moment, please, and I will take the brooch from my dress.”

Steven obeyed her ; and his obedience cost him dear. Up to this instant he had constantly resolved to bear his fate like a man ; to die and make no sign. When he found himself alone with her in the boat, a sort of wild hunger to see the beautiful face, for once, by his side at Ashcot, had come across him. This was all. He had been inspired by no more insensate hope than that Katharine Fane should walk with him to-night round the old farm garden : walk there—then leave it sweet for ever by the recollection that she had trodden its paths ! But now, one of those seeming trivialities which do, in fact, sway men’s lives more than any result of reason, more than any bursts of violent passion, was destined to overcome him. He held the plaid where he was bidden, and as Katharine moved to take out her brooch, the soft girlish cheek for an instant touched his hand. And Steven lost his senses.

“Katharine,” he whispered, bending down his head to hers, “I love you !”



CHAPTER XXII.

AN OFFER OF LOVE.

FOR a full minute she was dumb. All subterfuges, all feints, all the petty artillery of self-defence that had so often stood her in good

stead before, swept away, and the voice of nature calling to her, imperatively as it calls to the hawthorn buds in April or the ripening fields in June. Lord Petres and his money ; the Catholic church at Eccleston ; her future diamonds ; London houses ; country houses ; Mrs. Dering ; the world's opinion ;—where were they now ? A flood of new life seemed to have passed into her veins. Her heart beat thick and sick with an emotion for which she knew no name ; she could not reason with herself, she could not attempt to speak ; could do nothing but stand by Steven, voiceless, transfixed, as one blind or dumb might stand who had had his missing sense suddenly restored to him. For a full minute, in short, Katharine Fane was a woman, happy with as natural, as honest a happiness as little Polly Barnes had felt when Peter Nash of the mill first took her red hand in his, and awkwardly whispered such poor version of life's fairest story as he knew how to utter in her ears !

With a face set and pale as marble, silent, motionless, Steven stood awaiting her reply. He was, I think, in this minute less agitated than Katharine. His confession seemed to have cut him off from all the hopes and fears, the fever-fits of suspense, which once used so to unnerve him in her presence. He was no longer her slave, dreading to speak a too presumptuous word lest she should banish him ; no longer her inferior, whose love, whose very admiration, must be delicately couched, if it was spoken at all, lest it affront her. He had given her of his best now. He had offered her as much as a prince can offer to a woman, and her superior, at least for this one minute out of their widely separated lives, he stood and waited for her answer.

It came : in a voice unlike her own, certainly, but with calm unfaltering accents, in irreproachably dignified words : Mrs. Dering herself could scarcely have chosen better ones.

"And this, then, is the return you make ! after all the friendship that there has been between us !"

"It was never friendship," said Steven, "you know, as well as I do, that it was never friendship. From the moment I saw you I loved you, and you knew it."

"I—I had hoped of late," stammered Katharine, the firmness of

his tone not aiding her self-possession, "I had hoped, day by day, that you were getting the better of your first madness——"

"Hoped! you have seen, day by day, and hour by hour, that my love for you has gone on increasing!" he exclaimed. "I never tried to hide it. I couldn't have hidden it. It has become part of myself. I've no life but in you. You are in my work and in my sleep. Your face is before me always. I never thought to tell it you till a minute ago, but I'm glad I've spoken: it was due to you and to myself. Katharine, do you reject me?"

He had not moved from her yet, his pleading face was close to hers in the moonlight, his hand still touched—trembling as it touched—the plaid that she wore.

"Reject—*reject* you! Mr. Lawrence, do you know of what, do you know to whom, you are speaking?"

She drew herself away from him coldly. The word "reject," had bared abruptly to her the enormity of Steven's offence; the blackness of the gulf on whose brink she had for a moment vacillated. His confession had not been a mad, involuntary outburst of adoration, a cry wrung from his lips in defiance of his reason and of himself. It had been a deliberate avowal that an equal might have made her, demanding an especial answer, a "rejection." Steven Lawrence, let the truth be told, had asked her not to walk upon his peasant heart, but to love, to marry him! This was the pass to which her socialism, her quixotic, too-generous contempt for difference of rank and birth had brought her.

"I remember everything," said Steven. "I am in soberer senses at this moment than I have been for weeks past. I speak of love. I offer you, Katharine Fane, my love, and I am waiting here for your answer."

Again she paused for a moment. The strange sound of that word "love," spoken as he spoke it, softening her into pity in spite of everything. At last, "Mr. Lawrence," she whispered, "let all this be forgotten between us. Don't force me into saying more. Let me return home now, and in a few days come and see us again, and I will promise you that you shall find no difference in me. Why should you insist upon destroying a friendship that has brought such happy hours to us both?"

"It has never existed," said Steven, quickly ; "friendship between a man of my age and a woman like you ! Keep such terms for the men of education—the cold-blooded, smooth-tongued men of the world, to whom they may have a meaning. I want no friendship from you. I want all or nothing. If you turn from me, I never want to see your face again after to-night."

Genuine passion made his voice eloquent, and Katharine's heart rang to it. "I wish to Heaven you had never seen me !" she cried, half in tears. "I wish to Heaven you had never come among us ! I can't help it all, as you know. I was bound hand and foot—bound as much as if I had been a married woman—before I saw you ; and when I first met you, it was under the belief that you were Dora's suitor. You know this as well as I do."

"Miss Fane, do you remember that first moment when we saw each other ?"

"I—I—what is the good of talking of these things now ?"

"I held you in my arms, and I kissed you. Well," said Steven, in an odd, compressed sort of voice, "I am so much to the good for ever ! When you are gone, when you are married to Lord Petres, I shall still have that moment, that kiss, for my own possession."

"You are cruel to go on talking like this," she cried ; "I would have given much to make your life happy, and I have only made it miserable." Her voice choked.

"Do you care enough even to be sorry for me, then ?" he said, coming closer to her side again.

"I do !" cried Katharine, raising up her face to his. "I like you as much as in my position it is right for me to like any one. Be just, Mr. Lawrence. Have I not been straightforward with you throughout ? Didn't you know from the first that I was engaged ? Have I not—has not Lord Petres—spoken to you openly of our engagement ?"

"It is an engagement without love on either side," said Steven, bravely ; "an engagement that it would be honester to break than to hold to. Do you think, if I believed otherwise, I should be saying what I say ? Do you think I would have tried to come between little Polly Barnes and the lover she married on Sunday ? Why, I call a

man less than a man who, for his own passion's sake, would seek to win the love that belonged by right to another ! But love has no place in your engagement. Lord Petres is to give you his money, his name ; and you, your youth, your beauty, yourself—God ! what a bargain—in return ! It is a barter, and a dishonouring one. If you were to go to-night to Lord Petres, and tell him you wished to be set free, he would release you frankly, and hold you blameless. So much I know of him.”

Had Steven been deliberately trying to steel Katharine Fane's heart against himself to the uttermost, he could not have found words more fatally fitted to the purpose than these that, in his supreme ignorance, he had lighted on. A woman of her nature can forgive most things sooner than the assumption that a lover she has accepted *could* give her back her freedom “ frankly.”

“ You speak as I might have expected,” she cried, with a tremble born rather of anger than of weakness in her voice. “ You speak as I might have expected you would do, now that, for the moment, you feel me to be in your power. Lord Petres is a true, loyal-hearted gentleman, whose faith to me is as staunch as mine to him. How should you understand him, or the feeling that he bears towards me ? If—if Lord Petres were to offer me my freedom, as you say, I would not take it. If I had never seen Lord Petres—if I was unbound by any promise whatsoever, I would not stoop to listen to your suit. Now you understand me ?”

“ I do,” said Steven, slowly and distinctly ; “ the Lord help me ! I do understand you at last. To lose you is the bitterness of death, Miss Fane ; yet, perhaps, to have gained you had been worse for me. You would never have learnt the meaning of my love. You would never have known what to do with a heart filled as full as mine.”

She was silent : anger, pity, remorse, resurgent love, each struggling for mastery in her breast.

“ After to-night, it's not likely you'll see very much of me again,” said Steven, after a minute, that to Katharine was an eternity, had passed in silence, “ so I'll make no excuse for troubling you with one question now. *What* has been your object—your pleasure, in leading me on to this ? Some day, when I'm able to look back quietly

to it all, I should just like to have so much made clear to my mind."

"I never tried to lead you on," she faltered. "Tell me of one word, of one look of mine that has ever misled you."

"Tell me of one word, or of one look, that has not misled me!" said Steven. "You knew from the first what I was—how ignorant, how utterly your inferior in every way. You knew—yes, from that night at the theatre, when you wore the flowers I had sent you, when you advised me, calling yourself my 'friend,' to come often to your house—you knew of my love for you just as well as you know it now. And still you kept me at your side, still, day after day, you asked me to your house. Why, yesterday—God, the fool that I am to remember it all!" he broke off abruptly—"fool that I am to speak of it! Why have you brought me to this? to gratify your vanity, the only real strong feeling that you are capable of, and to amuse yourself by looking on hereafter at my ruin!"

"Your ruin!" she repeated, under her breath. "Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I implore you not to speak like that."

"I speak the truth," said Steven, sternly. "These few weeks in which I have lived through a fool's heaven at your side have ruined me. How do you suppose I shall go back to my old life—to my work, to my equals—and you lost to me?"

"You—you speak with passion now," she answered sadly. "In time you will find some one fitter—worthier of your love than me and——"

"And I shall love you, and you only, till I die," said Steven, with a sort of sullen triumph. "Whatever becomes of me, and of you, Miss Fane, remember what I have said to you to-night. You have ruined me. It had been better for me I had never been born than have lived to see your face! and I will love you till I die. Now do you wish to go? Unless I get the boat off at once," he was speaking just in his accustomed way again, "I shall not be able to land you at the Beacon rock as I promised."

Without waiting for her answer he walked back along the path by which they had come, holding away the boughs for her as he had done before when they reached the gateway. Then, neither of them

speaking a word, they returned, side by side, along the moonlit silent jetty to the boat.

A heavy dew had fallen since the sun went down, and Steven took off his jacket and laid it on the wet seat for Miss Fane. "No indeed, Mr. Lawrence," she cried, when he had helped her into the boat, "indeed, I will not be so selfish. I could not think——"

"Sit down," said Steven, in the half imperative, half-pleading tone that from the first had made its way so straight to Katharine's heart. "A sprinkle of English dew isn't going to hurt me. I'm not quite so sensitive as that!"

Then he laughed—a laugh that it was cruel for her to hear; and taking up the sculls, pulled as straight as the fast-ebbing tide would let him towards the Beacon rock.

It was brilliant moonlight now. The shallow sea glimmered and paled like one great sheet of changing opal among the half-bare rocks. The boat as it glided on left a glittering track of emerald white upon the water: the voices of a band of village people, getting ready for midnight sand-eeling, came to them ever and anon in pleasant murmurs from the shore; an accordion rudely played by some fisher-lad's hand, seemed, at this distance, and silvered by its transit across the bay, to make actual and pathetic music.

"What a good world it is!" said Katharine, almost involuntarily, after a long unbroken silence. "How easy it ought to be for people to live happily in it! Mr. Lawrence, I feel—oh, I do feel so miserable for having spoken to you as I did! Let us be friends again!"

Steven stopped in a moment at the sound of her voice. He drew his sculls within the boat, leant forward and looked at her steadily. There was an expression not at all good to see about the corners of his lips.

"Miss Fane, can you guess what I have been thinking about during the last quarter of an hour?" he asked her, abruptly; "what I am thinking about now? Of course you can't. How should you enter into any thought or feeling of mine? I've been thinking . . . do you know, that we shall pass a bed of sunken rocks just before we get to the Beacon; here and there a sharp black point above the

water shows you at this moment where they lie. . . . Well, why shouldn't I run the boat straight in upon them now—she'd sink in a minute—I know the exact point where many a boat has been lost before this—and so put an end to everything ?”

“I don't see anything against the scheme as far as you are concerned,” said Katharine, calmly. “I can't swim ; you, I suppose, can ; but of course as we are alone here no one would ever know that you had made away with me on purpose. Do it. I am not afraid.”

“You are not afraid because you don't believe a word I say,” answered Steven, but still without taking up the sculls. “You've lived your safe, well-smoothed, passionless life, till you don't believe in any strong impulse—bad or good. You can't guess even at the sort of thoughts that fill my heart at this instant. Why, to take you in my arms and die with you as I might here——” his voice shook with passion as he spoke ; “my lips to yours—is the strongest temptation I've ever withstood yet in my life. Do you hear me ?”

“I hear you ; I give you every credit for the sincerity of your wish to drown me ; and I'm not afraid,” said Katharine, looking unflinchingly at his face. “I have never been afraid of madmen yet, nor am I now. We will return, please (whether you eventually upset the boat or not), to what I was saying. Let us be friends again. Steven,” after a moment ; for the first, the last time she called him by his Christian name, and leaning forward, held out her hand to him, “I ask you to forgive me.”

Steven seized her hand ; he held it, with a grip that hurt her, in his own. “I can't forgive you,” he said. “I shall never forgive you ; but I shall always love you. Don't speak of our being friends—it stabs me like a knife.”

“At the end of a week will you come to see us ?”

“I will not. I will never, of my own free will, see your face again after to-night.”

“You—you are not going to drown me then ?” she asked, and tried to laugh, but ended with a little sob of pain ; and Steven moved, and knelt before her.

“Miss Fane,” said he, holding both her hands within his own

deathly cold ones, "I told you a while since that you had ruined my life for me, that I had better never have been born than have seen your face ! Well, listen to me now. My life was a dog's life, I was content with a dog's contentment till I knew you, and in loving—ay, and in losing you—I have become a man. Katharine," he cried, with a great tenderness in his voice, "I'd go through it all—if I could choose, I'd go through it all again, the sleepless nights, and the waking misery, and the final ruin, for the five weeks I've spent with you, and for these kisses that I give your hands, only your hands, you needn't take them from me—now."

He rowed her quietly to the Beacon rock ; and a quarter of an hour later, Katharine Fane, with wearied limbs, with a guiltily beating heart, was walking up through the shrubberies and across the lawn to the house. The lamps were lit in the drawing-room, the venetians and windows left wide open to admit the moonlight ; and for a minute or more, Katharine, unseen herself, stood and watched the people assembled there. Her mother wrapt up in soft draperies and pretty graces as usual, with the handsome rector talking to her on the sofa ; Lord Haverstock teaching, or being taught by Dora écarté ; Mrs. Dering still keeping Lord Petres amused with her well-trained powers of listening ; all the people to whose class she belonged, and amongst whom her future life would be spent. She had returned to the region of civilized beings from that of savages : and, looking back over the sea, Katharine saw the boat that was bearing the savage, Steven Lawrence, away from her for ever, and burst into tears !



CHAPTER XXIII.

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

To estimate aright the poignancy of Steven Lawrence's despair, you must remember the undividedness of his passion. Most men of the world have some counter hope, some counter interest, some counter suffering, it may be, to fly to under the first intolerable smart of a disappointment in love. Steven had absolutely nothing. From the moment that he saw Katharine Fane on his return to England

until now, he had lived, unquestioning of the future, upon his madness. The whole earth to him had been sweet with Katharine's breath, bright-dyed with Katharine's beauty ; and in an hour sweetness and fairness both had been wrested from him violently.

For a few days he got up and went to rest, ate his meals, did his work as usual ; would not give in, he said to himself ; would not let his life be altered, in any way, because a girl's fickle vanity had chanced to come across it. Then he broke down ; broke down into despair all the blacker because of the pent-up feelings, the clogged miserable attempt at self-control of the first few days. What was he working for, what was he striving after ? When he had got the farm back into order, what but slow torture would this round of monotonous country duties be to him ? the monotonous round which a week ago had been so full of relish ! At least let him try to forget himself and her in change—any change, any excitement, no matter of what kind—the first that offered itself. Was he to go on fretting like a sentimental schoolgirl who has lost her sweetheart ? Were a high-bred waxen face, a beautiful cruel mouth, the only things worth possessing that the world contained ? Because a man has lost heaven, is he to give up earth too !

It was in his old place under the silver beech (the first time he had had courage to smoke his pipe there yet) that the demon entered Steven's soul ; evoked, perhaps, by some mocking vision of the waxen face, the beautiful cruel lips, that had disdained him here. The next morning he announced abruptly to old Barbara that he was going away from home for a week or so ; and as he was waiting at the station an hour later, fell in—so well does chance sometimes help men on along the downhill road—with Lord Haverstock, and young Mr. Mills the horsedealer going up to London.

His lordship was very pleasant indeed in his manner to Steven ; Lord Haverstock, in truth, was never so pleasant or so much at ease as with men of a lower class than his own : made him and Mills renew their old acquaintance, asked him what he was going to do with himself in London : finally proposed, when they were in the train, that Steven should go down with them and see the cup run for at Newmarket, and that they should all three "make a week of it" *together*.

They made a week of it ; and Steven came back to the farm late on Saturday night, flushed with wine after dining at Lord Haverstock's the holder of a considerable sum of Lord Haverstock's money, also of the opinion, that to see a little of life, and to be in the society of other men, was all that he wanted for his cure. Heartbroken ! What man of sense cares for anything but himself, and for his own pleasure now-a-days ? Had Miss Fane a softer hand, a pair of rosier lips, than scores of other women, less difficult to please ? And he woke next day to feel that he had been talking blasphemies ; woke, and as he looked in the red dawn towards Katharine's house, knew, unworthy though he was, that he did but love her the more for this background of the last few days against which her pure girl's face shone in such unutterable contrast.

He went to Shiloh as usual that morning, and when the congregation came out of chapel found himself received with more than ordinary warmth by his different acquaintance. That Steven Lawrence, like young Josh, was going as straight as he could go to mischief, was an opinion that during the past week had been promulgated pretty freely among the elders of the congregation over their last friendly glass of spirits-and-water together of an evening. Still human nature being much the same in this primitive village as elsewhere, the fact that Steven Lawrence had "taken on" with Lord Haverstock, been with him to Newmarket, dined with him at Haverstock last night, added quite as much to Steven's social and personal popularity as it took away from his spiritual reputation—among the female members, at least of Shiloh. It was no wonder the family at the Dene had asked him there so often. My lord himself didn't look half so much the gentleman as Steven—no, nor was half as fine or handsome a man either. And coming out of chapel, pretty Miss Mason, the builder's daughter and leader of Shiloh society, bade her papa in a whisper invite Steven Lawrence to "tea and supper" with them after service this evening.

Steven accepted the invitation and went. Why, he asked himself, should he remain longer aloof from these people, who by birth and education were his peers ? Was it true, was it manly pride to hold himself above the class who would receive him as an equal and,

mourning for Katharine Fane in his heart, become a hanger-on, as Josh had been of Lord Haverstock's, a companion when my lord wanted him on a racecourse, or to drink and play cards with men like Mills at Haverstock in the absence, of course, of my lord's own friends? Here were simple, honest-hearted people who had been his father's associates and were more than good enough for him. Here was a fresh village girl, with the beauty at least of youth and good-humour on her face, who would make just the sort of wife that Klaus had told him he must choose to mind his house, and bring up his children, and set a dinner before his friends at Christmas.

He went. He forced himself to take interest in the small village gossip with which Mrs. Mason and her daughter enlivened old Mason's prosy village politics at the supper-table. He forced himself to admire Lucy Mason's black eyes and rosy cheeks and bright blue ribbons and boarding-school manners, and, next evening, half by accident, half by tacit appointment, met the girl and walked with her for an hour or so in one of the lanes near Ashcot, when his work was done.

As he was loitering at her side, Miss Mason, in bluer ribbons than ever, looking up, with all the village coquetry she was mistress of, into his handsome face, Katharine Fane and the Squire rode by them quickly on horseback, and as they passed, Katharine turned and bowed gravely to Steven. She looked pale and out of spirits, he thought: her face seemed to have lost its youth since he saw her last. And late that night, hours after Steven Lawrence had quitted poor Lucy Mason with a cold good-night at her father's door, a man's figure was seen by some of the servants at the Dene stealthily making its way from the shore to the terrace, then up through the shrubberies in the direction of the house. Mr. Hilliard and Dora when the story was told next morning both implored the Squire to get a policeman to sleep in the house. Katharine, conscious-smitten, held down her face, and in the course of the forenoon, after a good deal of unnecessary circumlocution, made some excuse for asking her step-father if he did not think it would be well for him to ride round to Ashcot soon to call on Steven Lawrence?

"Something, I think, must have hurt his feelings, papa," she said.

"Perhaps he was annoyed we did not ask him to dinner when Lord Petres and Bella were here that—that evening, you know, when I went out in his boat. If you were to call, and say we hope to see him again soon——"

"I'm going to call at Ashcot this very afternoon, Kate," said the Squire, unconsciously : "Macgregor wants to have a trial of that big roller of Lawrence's, and I'm going over to ask him for it. As to thinking the young fellow could expect to dine here with our friends," added Mr. Hilliard, "'tis nonsense, Kate, and the sooner he gets such false views out of his head the better. The lad's a good lad—won't be improved by taking up with Lord Haverstock, though—and he knows his way to the Dene without my telling it him. I suppose, if the truth's told, Miss Dora put on some of her fine French airs with him the other night, and choked him off a bit."

When the Squire came back late in the afternoon to dinner Katharine, as it chanced, was lingering, a book in her hand, in the avenue, and ran forward eagerly to speak to him. "And what did he say, papa?" she cried, when Mr. Hilliard had done telling her some piece of country news that he had heard in the village.

"What did who say?" said the Squire. "Oh, Lawrence! why, he'll lend it me, of course. Between ourselves, I don't see what he wants of it, Kate, with a bit of a grass plot like his; but 'twas one of young Josh's foolish fancies. I dare say, if Macgregor likes the roller, Lawrence wouldn't refuse any reasonable offer I choose to make him for it—what do you think?"

"I? Oh, papa! I think it would be much better to borrow it. He might be offended, you know, if you were to talk about payment. Did—did Mr. Lawrence say when he was coming to the Dene again?"

"He said nothing about the Dene at all, Kate. He's very much taken up about his hay. It was stacked hastily, and, I tell him, half of it stands as good a chance as ever I saw of firing."

"But he was just the same as usual to you, papa?"

"The same? Why, bless my heart, Kate, what fancies have you taken up now?" cried the Squire. "Of course the man was the same. One would think, from your face, I had gone to borrow a thousand pounds of him instead of a rusty old roller. He seems in very good

spirits, in spite of his hay, and tells me he won a nice little sum down at Newmarket. Better stick to his farm, I say ; but that's just the way of the Lawrences—if they don't ruin themselves in one way, they will in another. Where's Macgregor, I wonder ? I must tell him to send James over for the roller this evening."

Taken up about the firing of his hay ; in good spirits over his winnings at Newmarket ! And she had been weak enough to think that his face looked changed and haggard ; that he was haunting the Deue like a despairing melodramatic lover at midnight ; that his dissipation at Lord Haverstock's, his flirtation with Lucy Mason, were attempts to get away from himself, and from the pain that *she* had brought upon him. Katharine hardened her heart against Steven on the moment ; even put in a small joke about him and Lucy Mason in a letter she wrote to Lord Petres that night ; and a day or two later, when she met him again—Steven alone, the rector at her side now—gave him a heartless little nod and smile, just as she would have done to Lord Haverstock, or any other thoroughly indifferent person of her acquaintance, and passed on.

The play was over, then, at any rate, thought Steven, bitterly, as he heard her laugh, in answer to some remark of the rector's, after they had gone by. Over ; and an excellent good thing for him, too ! As long as she hid her indifference, she might have kept him ; yes, with only such a pale grave smile as she gave him the other evening, bestowed at ever such niggard intervals. She had paraded her heartlessness now—paraded it before his successor, the white-handed, soft-tongued parson fop ; and he detested her. She innocent ! she pure ! she, as he had once dreamed, above all other women, whose glory—whose shame—it was to win one man's heart after another, listen with downcast eyes, give liberal smiles to all, and her love—if indeed, a woman like that were capable of love—to none.

He spent that evening, not as he usually did now, at Haverstock, but with young Mills, and some of Mills's friends, at the village public-house ; drank with these men, talked with them, agreed in their views of life, sank himself altogether to their level. Then, next morning, came the inexorable reaction again—the aching head ; the aching heart ; the loathing self-contempt ; the love, purer, stronger, after every attempt to bring it to a shameful death !

The story is trite, and I do not care to linger over its details. Can you imagine how a piece of tapestry fashioned by some weaver smitten with sudden colour-blindness would look—all the bright hues there, cunningly woven, but jarring and dissonant? Something like this was Steven's state now. Youth, energy, capacity for enjoyment, every fairest material of human happiness, still his ; but no purpose, no coherence running through it all ! Love was stricken ; and with love the gist, the meaning, the pattern of his life, seemed abruptly to have vanished.

The year ripened to its prime. Golden harvest weather shone on and around the old farm-house (as Katharine had seen in her dream!), and one sultry noon as Steven was coming back to his dinner, his hands in his pockets, his face moodily downcast as usual, Dora Fane stood suddenly before him in the path. It was impossible for him to retreat, as he had more than once done before Miss Dora Fane of late. The lane was a narrow one, with high hop-grown hedges upon either side, and when Dot first appeared to him, jumping down from a bank, where, in accordance with her well-known sylvan tastes, she had been sitting, reading the "*Journal des Demoiselles*," there were not a dozen feet, at most, between them. Steven walked up to her and accepted—what could he do but accept!—the little ungloved hand that was held out towards him with such friendly warmth.

"Good—good morning, Steven !" she cried, "how strange it seems to meet you ! I didn't know—I didn't think you were ever going to speak to me again."

Dot was looking wonderfully young and pretty to-day, in a simple cambric dress, and with a broad Leghorn hat, natural poppies and cornflowers childishly adorning its crown, to shield her complexion. Her lips trembled, and something very like tears made her eyes soften, as she looked up at Steven ; even her voice did not sound discordant to him, as it once did, now that his memory was fresh with images of Miss Mason, and young women of Miss Mason's class, not of Katharine.

"Do you know how long it is since you have been to see us ?" she ran on, as Steven stood, awkward and silent, but holding her hand,

not without kindly pressure, in his. "Two months exactly, and never a word from you to say if I had offended you, and the last time you were there—do you remember? that night when all those people were on the terrace, we parted just as good friends as we had ever been in our lives!"

Steven dropped her hand, and turned his head quickly aside. That last evening; those people on the terrace; Katharine's smile of welcome; their parting at the Beacon rock; all had come back upon his memory in an instant with such cruel sharpness!

"It was impossible for me to come to the Dene any more," he exclaimed. "Surely you know that, Miss Dora? Surely you know that I wouldn't have slighted you, or—or the Squire without cause?"

"I *know* nothing, but I have guessed enough—enough," cried Dot, with a little gulp, "to make me utterly miserable! Steven, I should like to hear that you free me from blame in all this? I never thought—I never could have suspected——"

Her voice broke down, and the sight of her quivering lips, the familiar sound of his own name from her lips, touched Steven's heart. "I accuse no one but myself," said he, kindly, "and you least of all, Miss Dora. You were only too good to me from the first!" And indeed his conscience smote as he looked down at this poor little artless creature, and thought how absolutely she, and her friendship for him, had passed out of his recollection during the madness, the misery of the last two months.

"Well I shall never hold myself quite innocent," said Dot, and to show how nervous she was, she began to dig hieroglyphics with the point of her parasol in the dust. "If I had not, in my stupidity, sent you the wrong photograph you might never have returned, or you would have returned with no thought of *us* in your mind, and all this wretched misunderstanding might never have happened. Now mind," she went on quickly, "I've nothing at all to go upon but my own suspicions, Katharine has never mentioned your name to me since that last evening you were at the Dene. I only guess, and, as I told you, I can't hold myself innocent, and I have longed—yes, Steven, I have longed," and here Dora Fane's emotions fairly mastered her, and two great tears rolled slowly down her cheeks, "to

hear you say that you forgive me before I leave Clithero—before you bid me good-bye for good !”

In fairness to Dot it must be said that her agitation and her unhappiness were not wholly feigned. A letter written, in excellent spirits, by Mrs. Dering had given them tidings yesterday of the approaching marriage of Clarendon Whyte to an East End heiress ; and, as much as it was in her nature to mourn, Dot, during the last twenty-four hours, had mourned over this infidelity of her hero. The tears and the agitated voice were not wholly feigned ; neither had she, of malice aforethought, waylaid Steven with the intention of making a last appeal to his pity or his pride. She had come out because she knew that even to walk alone in dull country lanes was better for her to-day than to sit at home fretting over the thought of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, or of his rich bride ; when she got within sight of Ashcot, had felt, as she never had felt before, that she might have found a welcome asylum, but for Katharine, under its roof. And then, certainly, she had perched herself, not without deliberation, upon the bank by which she thought Steven Lawrence would pass on his way from work ; had given him no chance of escape when she saw him approach ; and now was shedding tears, and murmuring out her little nonsense about his “forgiveness” as prettily as she could, with the object of softening him. There was just the mixture of chance, and truth, and artifice in it all, which has brought about the turning-point of many a worthier life than Dot’s. She was very sincerely miserable ; and she sincerely wished Steven to say he forgave her—and a great deal more ! and (during the last minute and a half) she *had* formed a resolution of leaving Clithero. No wonder, as she believed herself, that Steven believed her, and softened. He was, he could be, about as much in love with Dot as with the flower-girl to whom he had given half-a-crown the day he landed at Southampton. But there is room for a great many tender feelings in a man’s heart besides actual love. Dora Fane was a pretty woman, although she was not Katharine ; a pretty woman murmuring soft words of liking and pity towards himself, and big tears were rolling palpably down her cheeks, and her lips quivered ; and Steven’s bruised heart longed passionately for any sympathy, any pretence *even of pure love, in the desolate life that he was leading.*

"Good-bye?" he said, in a low voice; "and why good-bye? Why are you to leave Clithero? What new arrangement is all this?"

"It is my own wish that I should go," said Dora, sadly. "No one but myself had anything to do with it. When—when Kate is married" (her eyes were down-cast still, but she could tell that Steven changed colour) "it would be loneliness greater than I could bear to live with aunt Arabella, so I mean to go out as a nursery governess. I am not clever, but my French, I think, will get me a situation, and I'm good at my needle, and Mrs. Dering will help me among her friends."

"When?" asked Steven, abruptly. "When is it to be?" He could get out no more; and Dot knew well enough what question he wanted to ask.

"Oh, not till after the wedding," she answered. "I should prefer, myself, to go now, but Kate would not hear of it, and of course I wouldn't like to go counter to her in anything, dear child. Lord Petres is drinking the waters at Vichy—better, he writes word, than he has been for years past; so I don't suppose there will be anything to prevent the marriage taking place in November.. After that I shall go. But why do I trouble you with my affairs?" she interrupted herself; "how sweet the dear old farm looks!" and she turned to a gap in the hedge through which, as it chanced, the dear old farm was not visible. "How well I shall remember all the familiar scenes, the fields, and the beach, and—and everything" (rural detail was not a point on which Dot was strong) "when I am gone."

Steven Lawrence stood for a minute or more irresolute. Dimly it was breaking upon him that perhaps he had treated Dora Fane badly; that, in his blind passion for Katharine, he had ignored the possibility of the poor little humble cousin's caring for him; the poor little cousin who had been his friend, had treated him like an equal from the first. He hesitated; his whole future life trembling in this minute's balance; then Dora half turned as if to go, and held out her hand to him. "Good-bye," she faltered through her tears.

But Steven kept her hand closer in his. "Miss Dora, I've a mind to say something to you, yet I fear—I fear to offend. You

know what I can offer," he went on, a sudden flush of brightness on her face emboldening him. "I don't deceive you. I have loved your cousin Katharine," her name came out without an effort, "as much as a man could love a woman so high above his reach, and of course there are things one doesn't get over in a day. If you could be generous enough to forget this—if Ashcot wouldn't be a home too humble for you—I would try, before Heaven—I would try to make you happy there!"

She gave a little cry of surprise; she fluttered and trembled, then made a pretence of drawing her hand away from his. "This is too sudden, Steven! You have spoken like this from pity—from impulse."

"No, I think not," said Steven, in about as unlover-like tone as could be imagined; "I speak altogether without impulse, Miss Dora. You are not over happy, I think. You talk of going out into the world among strangers, and I ask you, knowing this, if you will accept Ashcot as your home. Be sincere with me," he added, with something more of passion in his voice. "Let there be no further mistakes between us. Don't take me, for God's sake, if your heart says no!"

"And if my heart does not say no!" cried Dot, breaking into a smile that made her almost look a girl again. "And if, in spite of the unflattering way you ask me, I do take you, sir?"

Her face was upheld to his; but Steven entirely forgot what most men remember to do under such circumstances. "I shall try my best, Miss Dora," he said, with perfectly earnest humility. "There are things one doesn't get over at once, you know, but I shall try always to give you the first place in my heart, and to make you happy."

So the dreary parody was played out, and they were engaged.

"And the thousand pounds will be my own, to do what I like with," thought Dot, as she was walking home—"a thousand pounds of my own, and Uncle Frank will give me my trousseau, and I'll go to Paris for my wedding-trip. Dear, honest, worthy Steven! of course I shall love you, and no one else in the world. Tra-la-la, tra-la-la! the prison bonds are burst at last!"

And the fickle creature sang aloud, and almost danced for happiness along the lanes which, a couple of hours before, she had traversed, heartbroken ! Winter, and Ashcot, and life alone there, beside the dull farm-house hearth, with Steven Lawrence, seemed all a hundred years off to Dot's mind. Her wedding finery ; a fortnight, a month, perhaps, spent in Paris ; Parisian dresses, Parisian bonnets, were the visions that her spirit saw. I will do her the justice to say, that in these delightful dreams the false face of Mr. Clarendon Whyte was, for the moment, forgotten.



CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD BARBARA SPEAKS HER MIND.

DINNER had been long ready, and Barbara had been fretting herself sorely about seeing good food spoilt—"as if there wasn't waste and ruin enough in the world already without that,"—when Steven, three-quarters of an hour later than his usual time, entered the kitchen.

"A quarter to two," said old Barbara, without deigning to look round at him, "and the bacon was boiled to a turn, and the beans got butter put to 'em, as the clock struck the hour. It's none of my fault, Steven, if your dinner isn't fit to be set on table."

Steven threw himself down into a chair, and burst into a loud laugh. Barbara had not heard him laugh (at this hour of the day) for weeks past, and she turned sharply round from the fire and looked at him.

"Why, Steven, what ails you ?" she cried, forgetting the soddened beans and overboiled bacon in a moment at sight of his face. "You look as scared as if you had seen a ghost, lad."

"And so I have !" cried out Steven. "I've seen the ghost of my old life—the bachelor life you've read me such lectures about of late ! Give me joy, Barbara. Never heed about the beans and bacon : joy has taken my appetite away ! Come here," holding out his hand, "and give me joy. I'm going to be married !"

A deep flush spread slowly over Barbara's handsome, dignified

old face. "Steven," she said, "it's ill joking on matters like these. Marriage is a sacred thing, and cometh of the Lord."

"And who says I'm joking?" cried Steven, with another laugh. "I tell you, in sober earnest, I'm going to be married, Barbara. Will you wish me joy or not?"

"I—I don't understand these new-fashioned ways of yours, sir," said Barbara, holding back from his outstretched hand. "In my time decent men didn't go bachelors to harvest-field in the morning, and come back troth-plighted at noon! There was families both sides to be spoke to, and the Lord's guidance asked, and furnitur' thought of before it came to wishing o' joy and such foolishness. Why I wouldn't wish you joy of a heifer you'd bought until I seen what stock she came of, and what good she were likely to bring you—let alone a wife!"

"Oh the stock's a good one," said Steven; "only too good, perhaps. Don't fear, Barbara! The Lawrences haven't been used to marry beneath themselves."

"I'll warrant it's that little Lucy Mason," cried old Barbara, natural feminine curiosity waxing strong now that her first indignant burst of surprise was over. "Take and eat your food, my lad, and don't say another word to me about it. Marrying and giving in marriage was never part of my business. You'll wed where you choose, I say; and it's well for your poor mother, Steven, that she's lying peaceful in her grave! a set-up boarding-school miss, as handless as a baby, and nothing but a pair of apple cheeks for her fortune! But I'm not surprised. I knew what it would come to when you went to supper with them Masons after the services. I knew it from the first."

Steven moved over to the table, cut himself some dinner, and ate resolutely through one help; then pushed away his plate. "I'm not hungry to-day, Barbara," he said; "but I'll make the better supper. I walked home too quick under the sun. Now, then," he leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and looked up at the old servant, who was watching him narrowly, "I'll set your mind at rest. I'm not going to marry Lucy Mason—better for me, *perhaps, you'll say, if I was.* I'm going to marry Miss Fane."

"The Lord save and guide us!" cried Barbara, coming up all in a flutter to his side. "Miss Fane . . . Katharine Fane going to marry *you*? Steven, have you taken clean leave of your senses?"

"I think not—I hope not," said Steven, quickly; "and—and I never said anything about Katharine Fane. I have asked Miss Dora if she will be my wife, and she says, yes."

Barbara stood like a stone, her keen old eyes rivetted upon his face. "Steven," she said at last, "what's the meaning of all this play-acting, and why did Katharine Fane come and walk with you that night—back in summer, you know—if you was the other one's sweetheart all the time?"

"I was no one's sweetheart," said Steven, the colour mounting over his sunburnt face. "I didn't know you watched me so closely, Barbara," he added, with an attempt at a laugh. "I see I must be more careful what I do, and whom I bring here for the future."

"You can do what you choose and bring *who* you choose, for me, Steven!" said Barbara, in stern displeasure. "There'll be no place for me in a house full of your fine brides and gentry. I seen enough of them at Ashcot already. Mrs. Joshua was a lady—to her own thinking—and young Josh couldn't ruin himself fast enough without having Lord Haverstock and the like to dinner, with their wines, and their oaths, and their godless gentleman ways. But he didn't do as bad as you, Steven! He didn't look for a wife among the people who ruined and despised him. One of the Fanes here at Ashcot! 'tis to be hoped she brings a good fortune to support herself on, I'm thinking."

"She'll bring a thousand pounds, I believe, Barbara," said Steven, with thorough good temper. The whole idea of his engagement, of his marriage, was so grotesque to him as yet that he could feel scarcely more excitement in discussing it than in discussing the follies of young Josh, who was dead and gone. "At least, I think a thousand pounds was the sum the Squire told me once he meant to give her on her marriage."

"A thousand pounds—thirty pounds a year if it's safely put out," said Barbara, with grim accuracy. "Enough, if she's pretty saving, to find her in clothes. Steven, lad, I never thought you was over-

bright, but I did not—no, I did not—think you such a down-right——”

“Idiot,” said Steven, quietly. “Don’t be afraid to speak the truth. Neither would I have thought it of myself an hour ago ; but in love affairs most men are idiots once in their lives, they say. You’ve told me often enough during the last two months that the best thing I could do was to marry, and now I am going to marry you call me hard names. You’re difficult to please, Barbara.”

He got up from table, took his pipe from the chimney-piece, then, instead of going out of doors as was his custom to smoke, went and sat down in the broad old-fashioned sill of the open window, while Barbara, towering wrathful about the kitchen, swept away the dinner-things. The afternoon sun shone mellow across the ripening orchard and distant harvest-fields, lit up with pleasant homely warmth the new-filled rick-yard and narrow strip of herb-garden, lying under shelter of the farm gable : and, with a start, Steven’s memory travelled back, softening his heart as it travelled, to the days when Mrs. Joshua’s rule had first set in at Ashcot, and when his only refuge in trouble had been Barbara, and the place in the kitchen-window where he was sitting now. Impulse—poor Steven’s accustomed guide, not always a false one—bade him speak truth out to this best friend he possessed on earth, nearer than Central America, and laying his untasted pipe on the sill, he turned :

“Barbara !”

“Mister Steven.”

“Come here directly, and leave off calling me ‘Mister.’ I want to talk to you reasonably about this engagement of mine.”

She came up to his side, and Steven put his hand on her shoulder, and with gentle force made her sit down beside him on the window-seat. “What did you mean just now, when you said there would be no place for you in the house after my marriage ? How could Ashcot belong to one of our name, I should like to know, and there be no place for you under its roof ?”

The old servant’s lips twitched. “As long as it was for you, and you alone, Steenie, I’d have done anything—you know that, my dear ! The world isn’t what it used to be in my time,” said Barbara

"nor classes neither. Folks think more of them above them, and less of their Maker, and do travel and moither, and get to the end of their money and their lives faster than in the days when I was young, and of course you belong to your generation like the rest. I laid out your father and your grandfather for their coffins, and I sick-tended your mother to the last, and Mrs. Joshua (though not for the goodwill I bore her), and put up with young Josh's wild ways, and loved the poor lad, for the blood that was in him. But you are more to me than all of them, Steven. You always was . . . before you could stand alone you'd cry to come to me out of your mother's arms . . . and all I've got—not over much now—will be yours when I'm dead. But to wait upon this fine lady you've gone and fallen in love with . . . don'tee ask me, Steven. I couldn't do it. She wouldn't suit me, nor me her, lad. Take my word for it."

"I am not in love with any fine lady. I am not in love with Dora Fane," said Steven, in a voice that even Barbara's suspicious heart felt was sincere. "When I came back home first I was a good deal at the Squire's, you remember. I wasn't thinking of poor Miss Dora then—the worse for me ! and—well," said Steven, shyly, "I think, perhaps, she got to care a little about me. During the last two months I've never gone near the house—"

"Nay, you have done worse than going there," interrupted Barbara.

"And—and to-day I chanced to meet Miss Dora as I was coming back from work, as you know. She told me she was to go out as a governess when her cousin marries, and I thought she would be happier at Ashcot, and asked her to marry me. I mean to hold to my word, and do my duty to poor Miss Dora ; but don't you turn from me, Barbara ! I have heaviness enough on my heart without that."

And he took up his pipe; and began mechanically to fill it with tobacco, then held it unlighted in his hand, gazing out, with a strangely blank expression for a newly-accepted lover to wear on his face, through the open window. As she watched him thus, some intuition, some fine sympathy of affection seemed, in a moment, to lay bare before old Barbara the real state of Steven's heart ; and

with the belief that "her lad" was marrying more out of disappointment than from love, half, at least, of her bitterness against Dora Fane was, for that moment, disarmed. So much alike is the feminine soul always, and in spite of external accidents of age or condition.

"Don't talk of 'turning' again, Steven. Whatever happens I'll never turn my heart from you. There's nothing surprising to me in all this!" Nothing ever was surprising to Barbara. "The first day you came back to Ashcot, I marked how keen you was to inquire after the Squire's people, and from that night I seen Katharine Fane here in her white dress—I was up in Mrs. Steven's room, putting by the blankets and covers for summer—flirting, and gracing, and standing there with her face downcast at your side, I knew you was being made a fool of. A fine-born lady, if she chooses, may take up with a handsome lad like you, Steven, as a pastime—my lord and his cook and his physic-bottles not by!" added Barbara, with irrelevant contempt; "but if a poor girl who'd got a lawful sweetheart of her own was to act like it, we know pretty well what sort o' name she'd have to go by!"

Steven winced as if he had been stung. "Never talk to me like that again, Barbara," he cried: "I won't listen to it. You've no right to speak a disrespectful word of Katharine Fane. She came here that evening by accident. I took her out in my boat, and— and asked her to come and walk round the old garden with me, and she came. Whatever I was fool enough to hope or to suffer was no fault of hers. She's as much above me as the light in heaven, and I knew it from the first."

"And from that night till now what have you been, Steven?" said Barbara, hotly. "You came back—on my soul I believe you came back from America a steady lad, ready to give your heart to your land, and lead a God-fearing life among your own class. What turned you against it all? what made you take up with drink, and bad companions, and card-playing, and race-horsing, as you've done? I say, Katharine Fane; and may God reward her for it!" cried old Barbara, rising to her feet, and speaking slowly and solemnly. "It's small account to such as her to ruin an honest man's life for her

diversion, but there's One will give her her due yet. As to this other——"

"As to this other, Barbara?"

"Well, lad, as to this other, Dora as you call her (and a woman thirty years of age, and never gotten to her size, 'll marry a yeoman's son sooner than marry none), though I do say that you've a poor spirit to wed with any of the name, still, if you have past your word you must just hold to it, and I'll not set myself against her, worse than I can help, when you bring her home."

"And you wish me joy of my marriage, then, after all?" said Steven, with a singular sort of smile. "We've been a long time coming to it!"

"If marriage means giving up your bad companions, them and all belonging to them, I give you joy of *that*!" said Barbara, with terrible honesty; "but I'll wish you joy of nought else till I know better what I'm talking about. When you bring Dora Fane home, and I see her ways, and what fashion of wife she makes you, 'twill be time enough for wishing joy to my thinking!"

These were the only congratulations Barbara would offer; but when Steven came back from work at night, he saw that her eyes were red and swollen with crying; and, when supper was over and she was sitting quiet at her needle as usual, he put his arm suddenly round her shoulders, and, stooping, kissed her as he had done on the day of his return to Ashcot.

"You were quite right not to wish me joy, Barbara," he said, kindly. "Everything about my life hitherto has been a mistake—my marriage, for aught you can tell, will be the crowning mistake of all. As much as you and I can do now, is to make the best of it, Barbara!"

Then he went out into the starlight; and, as he smoked his last pipe on the spot where he had stood with Katharine, began to realize, with some degree of distinctness, the kind of future that lay before him.

CHAPTER XXV.

TEARS—IDLE TEARS.

THE first person Dora met, when she got inside the house, was the Squire ; and, drawing him back into the dining-room that he had just left, she at once told the artless story of her love into his ear. "And, oh, I hope you won't be very cross with me !" pleaded Dot. "Poor Steven's birth, I know, is not what you and my Aunt Arabella would wish, but—but I could never bring myself to care for any one else, and my ideas of happiness are very humble ones. Remember the station of life in which you first found me, Uncle Frank !"

"You are a good little soul, Dot," said Mr. Hilliard, looking at her with moistened eyes ; warm-hearted and generous at all times, the Squire was never more so than immediately after his excellent lunch and sherry at one o'clock : "and whenever you and Lawrence want help, you'll know where to look for it. If he can give you a comfortable home, and make you a good husband, I'd as lief see you married to Steven Lawrence as to any lord in England."

"Dear Uncle Frank ! my best—my earliest friend !" cried Dot, holding up her face to be kissed. "Now I feel my mind more at rest. Now that I have your consent, I feel that I dare announce my engagement to my Aunt and to Katharine."

"Oh, as to Kate, you needn't be at all afraid," said the Squire. "Kate from the first did her best to bring Steven Lawrence to the house ; indeed, if I speak the truth all I wonder is you didn't know your own minds long ago. From the first day he ever dined here, I could see pretty plainly myself what Master Lawrence was thinking of."

"Ah," said Dot, drooping her head, "we have each been a little to blame, I'm afraid ; each misunderstood the other, and made ourselves miserable. Thank heaven, that foolish time is over now !"

"And all that remains is for me and Lawrence to have a talk together, and then speak to the parson," cried Mr. Hilliard, as pleased as a schoolboy at the thought of having a wedding in the house.

"Well, Dot, you have stolen a march upon Kate, you see, and quite right too. *Seniores priores*. Miss Kate will have to be bridesmaid before she's a bride, after all."

"Dear Kate ! I'm sure when once she is reconciled to the marriage, my cousin will rejoice in my happiness," said Dot, demurely. "I—I told Steven I thought he might come over to-morrow morning about eleven. Would you mind having a talk with him then ? He wishes, I know, to speak to you."

"Of course he wishes to speak to me," said the Squire kindly, "and you may rest pretty sure Dot that Lawrence and I'll get on well together in what we've got to say. Go in now," he added, "and tell your aunt about it all. You'll find Kate and her together in the drawing-room, and it's as well to set the matter at rest at once."

"If I could only be sure of every one taking it as you have done, Uncle Frank !" murmured Dora, as the Squire was leaving her. "If I could only think that Aunt Arabella would receive poor Steven as you will !"

She made a better lunch than could be expected—the Squire having left her alone, to rally from her agitation as he thought—took her accustomed glass of claret, and felt in excellent spirits, and not in the smallest degree disposed to softer emotion, when a quarter of an hour later she entered the drawing-room to make her tidings known. Mrs. Hilliard, wrapped up in shawls, lay asleep over her novel on the sofa ; Katharine, without book or work in her hands, was sitting apart in the bay-window that looked towards Ashcot. Her face was paler than usual, Dot thought, stopping a moment, as she opened the door to watch her : something of youth seemed to have forsaken the rounded lines of cheek and throat : there was an air of listlessness and languor, very unlike Katharine, in the way her hands hung unoccupied on her lap. Did she really regret Steven ? Had the rector ceased to amuse her ? Did she want a new slave, or what ? Dora walked up to the middle of the room, took off her hat, seated herself in a position which commanded a full view of both her hearers, and rushed at once into her announcement.

"I have a great piece of news to tell, Kate dear, and I give you three guesses to find out what it is. Aunt Arabella, I have important news to tell. Something I'm sure that you will be glad to hear."

Mrs. Hilliard started up, annoyed in the first place at having been

disturbed, and in the next at having been asleep. Katharine turned round with a face like stone. "You are going to marry Steven Lawrence," said she.

"Brava, brava, Kate!" cried Dot, clapping her small hands together. "Now, that is what I call an intuition, a genuine bit of clairvoyance. Without a single hint, and after not seeing him for two months, I come in and announce that I've a secret, and Kate guesses it at once!"

"Then it is true?" said Katharine, rising, and coming towards her cousin, but looking whiter and whiter.

"Perfectly true," answered Dot, composedly, "I met Steven Lawrence in the lanes to-day, and he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. What in the world made you guess, Kate?"

"I have been expecting it," said Katharine, stooping and putting her arm round Dora's shoulder, "and now that it has come I wish you joy from my heart. Make him happy, Dot!"

Then she turned from her abruptly, and went and sat down, all in a tremble, on a low stool at her mother's side. "Mamma dear," looking up with a little wan smile at her mother's face, "this—this is good news—wish Dora joy!"

"It is a great shock to me," said Mrs. Hilliard, faintly; "but poor Dora never remembers that other people have not such nerves as her own. I never thought after all these years to meet with such a return—a common farmer, and you, Dora, one of the Fanes and great granddaughter to Lord Vereker, and——"

"Oh, mamma!" interrupted Katharine, with sudden passion, "let us forget lords and ladies, Fanes and Verekers for once! Let some one be happy in the world! If Dora cares for Steven Lawrence let her marry him, in God's name! What are all the Fanes and Verekers who ever lived compared to her happiness?"

"I told Uncle Frank about it as I came in," said Dot, "and he gives his consent, and Steven is coming to speak to him to-morrow. We shall be very poor, I suppose. That I make up my mind to. And I know Steven isn't a gentleman, and I make up my mind to that. Good marriages don't fall to the lot of every one. I must *take my life from beginning to end as it comes to me, and I can't*

think, Aunt Arabella, that you will be made very unhappy by my loss."

"If—if it wasn't so near!" said poor Mrs. Hilliard. "If it had been even in another county, but—oh, Dossy, Dossy, well for you that you have been spared this!—not two miles as the crow flies, and a dissenter, and everything!"

"Well, now, I really do not see how distance would lessen the disgrace," cried Dot, in her mocking way. "You need not trouble yourself to think of me when I'm married, my dear aunt, and as you never look through the north windows you won't see more of our poor, humble, obnoxious dwelling than you choose. The thought of my cousins' excellent marriages will console you, I'm sure, for the shame of mine, and as to religion—nothing would be simpler than for one of our family to change *that*, Aunt Arabella, as you are aware."

"Dora," said Mrs. Hilliard, drawing herself up erect, and with a light Dot knew coming into her mild blue eyes, "little as I know, or wish to know, of this person Lawrence, and much as I feel that you are lowering your family and yourself by your marriage, I pity him."

Dot jumped up, and made a curtsy.

"I pity, from my heart, any man who is to have a temper, a tongue like yours at his fireside."

"Ah well! men live through a great deal of domestic persecution," said Dot; "and if this poor misguided Steven wishes to marry me, his future sufferings are exclusively his affair, my dear aunt, are they not?"

"Yes, his sufferings and yours, too, will be your own affair exclusively," exclaimed Mrs. Hilliard, with a feeble burst of energy. "On your marriage day my fifteen years of bondage will end. May Steven Lawrence's affection for you prove a truer one than mine has been."

"Amen," said Dot, piously. "I certainly shall have a poor prospect before me if it does not."

Mrs. Hilliard put up her handkerchief to her eyes. "This is my reward," she murmured, "and I accept it. Dossy—if from a better world it is permitted us to look back upon the hearts of those we loved below—you know——"

"My dear aunt Arabella," interrupted Dot, with the most thorough good temper, "don't be agitated, and don't commit yourself to any of those unorthodox apostrophes. My mother, if she is in a better world, and if she can look back from it, will see that you have behaved very decently to me—quite as well, I dare say, as she would have done if the case had been reversed, and a child of yours had fallen, a pauper, into her hands. The Fanes are not, I take it, a family overburthened with natural affections." Mrs. Hilliard raised her soft eyes to the ceiling. "Kate seems to me the only one of the race who possesses a heart at all—and hers is fitful in its action! You, my dear aunt, and Mrs. Dering and myself, all seem to me to have been cut from one block, as far as our moral nature is concerned." And Dot laughed aloud.

"I wonder you can talk like this now, Dot," said Katharine, for the first time joining in the tournament. "I should have thought you were too happy to be bitter about anything to-day."

"Bitter! who is bitter, Kate? not I, in the least. I like to be able to speak out for once—it seems to expand one's lungs after so many years of silence—and an announcement of marriage, like a christening or funeral, is, I believe, a proper time for these delightful family expansions of sentiment. Aunt Arabella thinks I am ungrateful; I ask, what cause have I to feel gratitude towards her? Uncle Frank took me away from my bonnet-making in Paris, and I thank him, for his intentions at least, and you put your arms round my neck when I came, Kate, and offered me a bit of your garden, and your only half-crown the first night I was here, and I am grateful—no, I'm much more than grateful to you. Who else has been kind to me? Arabella took away my little pink bonnet and my white parasol—the first I'd ever had, and Uncle Frank's present to me—I never forgot that! and Aunt Arabella . . ." Dot stopped short; and two great tears rose sullenly in her eyes.

"Go on, if you please, Dora," said Mrs. Hilliard. "You have made me very ill—I feel my palpitations beginning already—but go on! Let me hear what single charge of unkindness you can bring against me."

"*You took away my silk dress!*" cried Dora, with a burst of

genuine feeling, "and had it made into one for Kate. 'Poor Dora was not in a position to wear silks,' I heard you say to Uncle Frank. Well, I bore no malice to the child herself—I wasn't wicked; when I saw how gentile she looked in it, I kissed her little bare neck and arms; but you, Aunt Arabella, I hated you—I hated you! and I don't think I've quite got over the feeling since. I had never had anything finer than alpaca before, and I loved my dress. I sat and looked at it when I went to bed—it came from Paris; it was like a companion to me, and you took it away!" Dot's voice broke.

"I—I never heard such a ridiculous charge in my life!" said Mrs. Hilliard; "and unless you had had a most vindictive heart, you would have forgotten it years ago. Pray, how many dresses has your uncle, has Mrs. Dering given you since?"

"All I have ever possessed, I know," answered Dot, "but not one of them has made up for *that*. That came from Paris, and so did my little bonnet and my parasol, and I was a child then, and a stranger, and fretting—yes, fretting to be back among my friends—and you took my presents away from me! Hard as she was, the *Mère Mautrat* herself wouldn't have robbed a child!"

"Dora," said Mrs. Hilliard, half frightened, half conscience-stricken, "you shall not provoke me into using hard words to you. Ungrateful, unchristian though you are, I will not forget that you are Theodosia's child. You talk of robbery; will you tell me who is going to make you a settlement on your marriage? who will furnish you with your trousseau? who will——"

"Mamma!" interrupted Katharine, starting up and going over again to Dot's side, "I will not listen to another word of this! Dora ought not to have spoken to you as she did, but it's ungenerous—ungenerous to remind her that she is less well-off than we are. Poor little Dot!" and now she stooped and, for the first time, kissed her cousin's cheek; "to think that you should have been able to remember a dress and a bonnet, and a white parasol, all these years! Let that first grievance and every other one be buried now. You are going to begin a new life, you—you—" in spite of herself Katharine's voice shook, "have great happiness before you, I think. Don't let the first day of your engagement be spoilt in this way! Mamma,

show that you are incapable of small pride, or small ill-feeling of any kind, and wish Dora joy."

Katharine's office, from the time she was eight years old, had been one of peacemaker ; and long habit had taught her the art of bringing the contending parties at least to outward truce.

"I never bore ill-feeling to any one in my life," sobbed Mrs. Hilliard. "I've had no thought for eighteen years, I'm sure, but the happiness of others—as to pride, God knows mine has, long ago, been levelled lower than the dust !"

Then she waved Dora to her side, kissed her in the same fashion and spirit that she had done when the Squire first brought the meagre-faced child home to the Dene, to be his wife's cross ; and ten minutes later Katharine (sitting apart again in the window) heard them discussing together quite pleasantly about millinery, wedding breakfasts, white silk, and bridesmaids.

"The two Miss Ducies of Ducie, if we can get them," Dot remarks, "and Kate, of course, and I think old Grizelda Long : she's not ornamental, and she's not agreeable, but, as Arabella says, one never feels safe in leaving the Phantom out of anything. Besides, she has been bridesmaid so often that she knows exactly what to say and do, and it's a great thing at a wedding breakfast to get some one who will make the other people open their lips. I hope Steven won't want to be married at Shiloh, by the way ; if he does, we must go there first, before the Ducies arrive. Now, Aunt Arabella, remembering how small I am, and everything, *do* you think white silk or satin would become me best ?"

In the excitement attendant upon these momentous questions, Mrs. Hilliard's novel lay beside her unheeded for the remainder of the afternoon ; and when the Squire came in he found, to his happiness, no storm of moment awaiting him.

"Your mother takes this engagement of Dot's beautifully—beautifully—by Jove !" he said to Katharine, when he found himself alone with her for a minute or two before dinner. "I can see pretty well what the thought of Lawrence's humble birth costs her, but she makes light of her own feelings, poor dear soul, as she has always done, for the sake of others. Now, what do you say to it, Kate ?

Why, you are looking as grave as a judge, child. Surely you won't be a turncoat to your own democratic principles now that you are put to the proof. What does it really matter whether the lad's a yeoman or a duke so long as he makes poor Dot a good husband?"

"I—but I am overjoyed to hear of it," answered Katharine, her lips quivering over the falsehood. "From the time Steven Lawrence returned to England I thought how it would end, and——"

"And did your best to bring it on," said the Squire. "What true woman won't try her hand at matchmaking when she has a chance? Now I look back, I can see your finger in the pie all along. 'Do ask poor Steven to dinner, papa.' 'Don't hurt poor Steven's feelings by offering to buy his roller.' 'How are poor Steven's spirits now that he comes to see us so seldom?' Eh, Miss Katharine? you have had pretty nearly as much to do with it, I suspect, as your cousin herself."

"I? Well, perhaps I have," answered Katharine, wearily. "Oh papa, don't joke, please!" and the tears rose in her eyes. "All these engagements are terribly serious things to us who are the principal actors in them."

She tried at dinner to force herself into a little kindly gaiety with Dot; with a mighty effort she swallowed food enough to prevent her want of appetite from being noticed; and not till she had poured out her mother's coffee as usual, and listened to a long after-dinner talk about the wedding and the settlements, and what was to be written to Mrs. Dering, and what said to Steven to-morrow, made some excuse for getting away, and stole out unnoticed and alone into the open air.

It was chill, dull weather; a curtain of low-lying cloud shutting out horizon and sky; the sea leaden, the trees and garden plants mournful in their first yellow hues of waning summer. What a changed world from the one in which she had walked awhile since with Steven! every blossoming hedgerow in its prime, and birds exultant, and sunshine over all! She went down to the terrace, stood at the same spot by the steps where she had stood with him on that first day he ever came to the Dene. What was life? she thought, resting down her throbbing head upon her clasped hands.

What was the meaning of this play that was going on about her, above all of her own share in it? For twenty-one years she had drifted on, eating, drinking, wearing pretty clothes, praying, flirting, and amusing herself, and had never been troubled yet by wondering if any sterner purpose than Katharine Fane's pleasure lay behind it all. In this hour of humiliation—the word must out: in this hour of acutest jealous pain—a sharpened sense of the loneliness, the mystery, the awfulness of her own life overcame her, and changed Katharine Fane from a girl into a woman. She was going to marry Lord Petres—about the facts of it all there was neither mystery nor doubt—and have everything this world could give her, as Mrs. Dering said—make better her prospects for the next, probably, by upholding the old true faith; and Dora was to marry Steven Lawrence, the dissenting yeoman, and live in a poor farmhouse on a barren shore. And the whole thing would be a miserable mockery, a shame, a sin! cried her heart; for she would never love her husband, nor Steven his wife; and across the great social gulf that divided them she would look back with guilty yearning, and see his face, as she had once seen it, white and passionate in the twilight, and know that her place ought to be at his side, and that her rejection of him had been a crime against nature, and her truth a falsehood, and her whole later life a hollow piece of tinsel sordid selfishness. Which spoke truth—the voice of pride, of prudence, of womanly reserve and dignity, or the voice of this new feeling which shook the very foundations of her nature, and made every old idea of happiness so pale and trite? Love! Did she love Steven Lawrence? Steven Lawrence whom she had rejected, whom she had so striven to forget, the man who in common coarse dissipation, had outlived *his* love in a fortnight, who already, won by Dora's pretty face, had pledged his word to an engagement that was an outrage to herself! Love! She ought much rather to hate him, only—poor Katharine!—she didn't. No, she could never hate him; and as she must never love him, she would try hard to be his friend, she thought. They would be brought closer together when he was Dot's husband, and it would be noble, it would be generous in her to try and help on their happiness. *Their happiness*; and why theirs? cried her heart again.

Why be generous and noble? Why not be happy yourself? And from low-lying cloud and leaden sea came neither hope nor answer. The shrill wind moaned like a reproachful human voice among the plantations; the first dead leaves of autumn fell fitfully around her and at her feet; and once again Katharine Fane wept (tears such as she had never shed, never while she lived could shed, for Lord Petres) for Steven Lawrence.

At the end of half an hour or so Dora came down to look for her. Katharine lifted up her head, and watched the small Dutch-doll figure as it drew near, pattering along as if the grass terrace had been a trottoir, and singing some song about "*l'amour et la folie*," with true French intonation and spirit; and, for the first time in her life, a feeling very near akin to jealous hatred made itself felt in Katharine Fane's heart. She was horribly ashamed of herself—poor Katharine! brimful of contrition and humility when a minute later, Dot came up, seized her hands, drew herself up to her level, and kissed her. "Kate," she said, "we have not been alone together yet. Now, *are* you glad that Steven Lawrence has asked me to marry him?"

"I? Why, Dora, you know I am—"

"Speak the truth, please, Kate. I love you much better than I shall ever love him; and unless you like the thought of our marriage, I don't see that I need hold to my word. It isn't too late to change yet."

"My dear Dora, how can you talk such nonsense?" Katharine cried: something in the sound of her own voice shocked her! "You know very well I have always wished it. Papa says he believes I was trying my hand at matchmaking from the first. How can you talk of breaking your promise to Steven Lawrence?"

"I don't suppose it would break his heart if I did," said Dot. "We are not desperately in love, either of us, and don't pretend to be."

Every lingering feeling of repulsion towards Dora seemed to die away in Katharine's heart at the confession. "Unless—unless Steven Lawrence cared for you, Dot, he would not have asked you to marry him."

"Oh, dear, yes, he would," answered Dot, unhesitatingly. "He has been miserable and moping ever since that last evening he came here—you can guess why, most likely, Kate? Then seeing me to-day reminded him of—of things that are past and gone, I suppose, and in the revulsion of feeling, I believe that is the correct sentimental expression, he proposed to me. How oddly everything has turned out! After sending him the wrong photograph, and not caring a bit for each other when we met, you see we are going to be married after all. I wonder whether people—the Ducies, I mean, and old Lady Haverstock, and all the county people, will call on me?"

"I wonder whether you feel happy, Dot? That is of more account than morning visits from Lady Haverstock and the Miss Ducies will ever be."

"Feel happy? Well, I don't know," said Dot, pausing to deliberate. "I did, at first—very. You see, I made up my mind to spend my honeymoon in Paris, and thought only of getting away from home, and—well, really, Kate, I believe I danced as I came along those horrid lanes. There was the prospect, too, of my little scene with Aunt Arabella to amuse me then. But now, Katharine, I'm not as heartless as you think, now that the excitement is over, and I am settling down to the thought of my engagement, I *do* feel sorry," and Dot turned away her face, "about poor Clarendon Whyte."

"Clarendon Whyte! who is already selling himself for so many hundreds a year to a woman double his age!" cried Katharine. "What a travestied world this is! Why can't some—why can't any—two people, who really love each other, marry, I wonder?"

"Oh, they would be very miserable if they did, depend upon it," said Dot, philosophically. "If Steven had gained his wishes, and I mine, I dare say we should not have been happier than we shall be as it is. I like him, you understand—I wouldn't have accepted if I had not—and I shall do my best, of course to make him happy."

"Yet a minute ago you said there was plenty of time still for you to change your mind?"

"Only if you had disliked the marriage, Katharine. I've thought, lately," went on Dot; "yes, I'll tell you everything honestly now ;

I've thought that something was going a little wrong with you a times, and I wasn't quite sure as to what it was——"

"Excessive weariness at the length of the rector's visits, I should say," interrupted Katharine. "Has he been absent one day during the last six weeks, I wonder?"

"Well, very likely," said Dot, "or the heat of the weather perhaps; you are always paler, I remark, in summer. At all events, I determined I would ask you about it openly. It was possible, I thought, that you and Steven had had a serious quarrel that last evening we ever saw him at the Dene, and, if so, it might have been disagreeable to you for him to come into the family."

Was this genuine? the prompting of true and delicate affection, or only a bit of the Gallican insincerity which was an ingrained part of Dora Fane's very nature! Katharine, ever ready to accredit other people with the highest, most generous motives, took it at its full worth, and felt more and more ashamed of her own first small jealousy.

"Dot, you and I must always be friends!" she exclaimed. "No matter whether our roads lie apart or near. Mind, that is a compact."

"Done," said Dot. "I dare say I shall not be overburdened with other friends when I live at Ashcot Farm! Arabella will be delighted—it annoys me to think how delighted Arabella will be!—to hear that I and Steven, her two *bêtes noires*, are safely disposed of, and she'll send me a sufficiently expensive present, and have too severe an attack of her old headache to come to the wedding, and then, thank Heaven, she need never see my face again! Katharine, how I used to hate her, and Aunt Arabella! It seems quite good to talk of it now I'm going away. My love for you, I verily believe, was really only another form of hate for them."

"Don't talk of hate to-day, Dora. All that belongs to the past now."

"Ah—the past!" soliloquised Dot, stretching her tiny clasped hands across the terrace wall, which was just on the level of her chin. "The past is already a long word for me, Kate. I'm near upon thirty years old—I hope Steven Lawrence doesn't know it!"

"You had better tell him the truth, I should think," said Katharine. "The truth on that, and every other subject."

"There I don't agree with you at all," cried Dot. "The French say, wisely that a woman is always the age she looks. I look twenty-five at the outside : then why *be* more than twenty-five ? For, of course, Steven doesn't remember whether I was fourteen or twenty when he went to America. As to telling him the truth 'on every subject,' I can't imagine you to be in earnest. What ! put a man like Steven Lawrence in possession of the charming little romance of the Rue Mouffetard and of Madame Mauprat ? Never !"

"There is no disgrace in the story," said Katharine. "At an age when other children played you worked, Dora. It seems to me Steven Lawrence would only love you better for hearing it."

"I won't try the experiment," said Dot, with determination. "My eyes have not been shut all these years, Kate. I know how good it is for a husband to believe he took his wife from a better position than the one he gave her. Naturally, Steven is like other men of his class—thinks it rather fine to marry a lady." Katharine turned away her head impatiently ; "but if he knew how my childish days were passed, he would have a right, some day, to remind me of it ? Isn't that true ?"

"I would be sincere, Dot. I would never be ashamed of a thing in which no shame was !"

Dot was silent. After a minute or two, "Katharine," said she, "that remark of yours sets me thinking. I wonder what sort of woman I should be now if they hadn't made me a hypocrite from the first—a better or a worse one ? When Uncle Frank first found me in the Rue Mouffetard, you may believe I knew little of what was counted right and what wrong. He asked where we should go that first Sunday in Paris, and I said boldly, 'Mabille.' (I could die now when I think of it, and of his face. 'Me at Mabille,' said Uncle Frank, 'and on the Sabbath !') Well, we got home ; and if I had been left to myself, I should have talked, to you at least, of my former life—the old house and the garden by the Bièvre . . . it was full of flowers in summer, Kate ; there were little clean white steps leading down to the river—and Hortense and Delphine . . . It was all very poor and mean, I know ; and most likely, *Hortense and Delphine* were not angels. Still, you see, it had

been all my life ; and when I was taught never to mention it and to be ashamed of the people I had lived among, and yet had so little put into its place, I believe, somehow—I don't know how to express it myself—it stunted me, eh, Kate ! Who shall say ?”

“Who shall say ?” repeated Katharine ; for, indeed, this question as to Dora's latent or possible good-heartedness was a hard one for her to answer.

“More likely than not, I have no inborn capacities for loving in me, as I told Aunt Arabella to-day. That very Sunday as I was walking with Uncle Frank in the Champs Elysées, I met two of my old friends with their sweethearts in blouses, and—well I thought myself a duchess, and passed them by without recognition.” Dot laughed, with unaffected amusement, at the remembrance. “That did not show a very noble nature, did it ? Still I suppose I was human in those days, Kate ?”

“I should hope for every one's sake that you are human now,” said Katharine.

“For Steven's sake, you mean. Well, whatever I am, I intend to keep him thoroughly in the dark about the Rue Mouffetard. ‘Our little Dora was brought up in the most retired way by a dear old French lady, a legitimist, of the Faubourg St Germain,’ Aunt Arabella used to say, and that would be quite explanation enough—if he knew what it meant—for poor Steven. Now, if you were in my place, you would certainly go to Paris for your honeymoon, wouldn't you, Kate ?”

“If I was in your place no doubt I should,” answered Katharine, with a sigh.

“I didn't mean that. I mean where would you, yourself, go ?”

“I, myself ? wherever Lord Petres chose. To Paris, very probably.”

“'Tis the best place on the earth,” cried Dot, “above all for a honeymoon. Even without knowing a creature it would hardly be possible to get tired of each other. To look at the people on the Boulevards and the toilettes in the Bois would be amusement enough for me. It would be a mistake to get all my dresses made up until I see how they are worn in Paris, Kate ?”

"I think it would be a mistake to go to Paris at all !" and Katharine gave one last wistful look across the sea before she turned away towards the house. "I should think the woods and fields round Ashcot would be far pleasanter than any crowded city in this quiet autumn weather."

"Fields about Ashcot !" cried Dot, putting her small hand under her cousin's arm. "A thousand thanks, my dear. I am to have fields, remember, and nothing but fields, till I die. At least let the dose be gilded by a fortnight of good wholesome bricks and mortar at starting."



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST APPEAL.

STEVEN came on the following morning punctually at the hour that Dot had ordered him, and was received in due form as an accepted suitor by the Squire and Mrs. Hilliard. He came again next day for exactly one hour and a half ; and the next ; but without seeing Katharine ; and so matters went on for a week. It gave him a secret, a poignant pleasure all this time to feel that Miss Fane avoided him. If she were wholly indifferent to his engagement, he thought, she had been glad to meet him, and to let her indifference be seen. And at last he got so far as to ask Dot, in a tone of voice not very palpably forced, how it was he never saw anything of her cousin ? Was Miss Katharine away from home or ill ? He hoped not ill.

"Oh, Katharine is at home," answered Dot ; "but I fancy she has not liked to interrupt us yet. I shall tell her," looking up with pretty archness in his face, "that you are tired of being tête-à-tête already—you bad Steven ! and ask her to be in the room when you come to-morrow. You will find her looking very pale," Dot ran on. "Just think, when old Mr. Ducie was calling yesterday he mistook her for the eldest, and offered her his congratulations. Her colour is quite gone—poor Kate ! Really and truly, Steven, I don't think it kind of Lord Petres to remain abroad so long."

All that night Steven lay awake, burning with the old fever of

doubts and fears—ay, with the old fever of hope, where no hope was—and next morning, more than half an hour before his accustomed time, made his appearance at the Dene. Thanks to this half-hour he found Miss Fane alone in the drawing-room. Dora, whose leading ideas of an engagement, as of all other human affairs, were connected with dress, was still busy in her room over a charming little morning gown of white muslin and rose-coloured taffetas, a surprise—I speak in Dora's language—for Steven ; and Katharine, who had no thought of his appearing before the usual hour, was at her piano, singing to herself that saddest love-song that I think ever flowed even from the pen of Glück : the old, old, ever-sweet “Eurydice.”

Steven came in unannounced, for already he was treated as a member of the family in the house, and had listened to two or three bars, sung in Katharine's plaintive voice, before she saw him, and broke off. He had resolved to be thoroughly stranger-like and self-possessed on this, their first meeting, so begged coldly that he might not “interrupt her in her practice.”

“My practice is over,” cried Katharine, her face all blushes. “I choose an early hour so as to inflict as little on other people as possible. If you had once heard me sing, Mr. Lawrence, you would not wish to be in the room with my practising going on.”

“I *have* heard you,” answered Steven. “The first Sunday I was home—that Sunday I met you outside Clithero Church, do you remember? I stood under the chancel window, and listened to the hymn after the sermon—I mean listened to your voice !”

Whenever they met, the book opened at the same page ; whenever he looked at her, Steven's eyes got back the tenderness which in itself was a confession. Katharine crossed the room, her head erect, her heart hotly beating, and stood at his side before the mantelpiece. What, had she sunk so low, she asked herself, that she must submit to sentimental speeches, to covert love-making, from this man now that he was Dora's suitor? He must be shown at once, shown pretty plainly, upon what kind of terms their intimacy for the future must stand. Then aloud, and in a marvellously grave calm voice, “Mr. Lawrence,” she said, “I need hardly tell you how glad I am to see you

in our house again—how unaffectedly glad of the cause which brings you here ! I congratulate you on your engagement most heartily !” And she offered him her hand.

He took it ; and in spite of the resolution of each the two poor foolish hands trembled in each other’s clasp. “It seems more than eight weeks since I was here,” said Steven, holding her hand tight, and looking down upon her face—white and changed that dear face looked to him now that the blushes had faded from it. “Of course I know that it’s only eight weeks—it was on the sixth of July that I took you in my boat to Ashcot. Measuring the time by what I’ve suffered it seems nearer upon eight years, Miss Fane.”

Katharine drew her hand away instantly. “I really don’t see what you should have had to suffer, Mr. Lawrence ! Papa has spoken of you sometimes, wondering you never came to see him, but from what he said I should think you must have been amusing yourself pretty well. You were at Newmarket with Lord Haverstock, I heard. You have already made plenty of friends in the neighbourhood.”

“Amusing myself !” said poor Steven, with a sort of groan. “Yes, you must know how much ! You must know whether I have been trying to find pleasure or stupefaction.”

“Indeed I do not,” answered Katharine, unwisely dwelling on the subject. “When I saw you last you were walking with . . . some person from the village, I think ! You were looking in very good spirits, and I was delighted to see you so.”

“And you were with the rector,” said Steven. “Yes, that was the night I went desperate ! After you passed me you laughed—I can hear how your voice sounded now—you laughed, and looked up in the parson’s face and I swore to myself to be a man and get over my folly. Next day I went to London, went down to Newmarket with Lord Haverstock, and—well, I’ve been trying ever since to forget it all—and I haven’t ! I have been with you three minutes,” he exclaimed passionately, “and my madness is back upon me—worse than ever !”

Every tender, every pitying womanly fibre of Katharine’s nature was stirred by his voice. “Listen to him !” cried her heart, in one

last unavailing revolt. "Listen to him, while to listen is still no sin." "Turn from him!" cried reason; "blush for your own pitiful weakness, and turn from him!" And the conflict, this time, was not of long duration. "You make me feel that I have done well not to see you hitherto," she said, very low. "You make me feel how wrong it is of me to speak to you now. It was by my cousin's wish. I—I will never see you alone again."

"You will do as you like," was Steven's answer. "Keep away from me, or see me; what have I to do with your actions or your resolves? As long as I live I shall never be a hypocrite, with you at least. Whenever you do see me I shall speak the truth. I told you that evening at Ashcot I wasn't likely to cure of my madness, whatever happened. I tell you so now."

"And telling me this, and feeling this—if, indeed, anything you say or feel is sincere—will you tell me why you have asked my cousin to be your wife?" cried Katharine, indignantly. "Is it not enough for two people to be mis—I mean," she interrupted herself, colouring violently, "is there any occasion why poor little Dora should be sacrificed too?"

"I don't believe that Miss Dora will be sacrificed," said Steven coldly. "Your cousin knows that she will command my whole duty—my duty, and as much as I have to give of affection—and so she takes me. You want to know why I asked her to marry me? Well, I can't tell you; I have put that question to myself pretty often during the last few days, and have not been able to answer it yet. From very despair, perhaps; I knew Miss Dora did not dislike me, and I knew, for very certain, that I could make myself no more miserable than I was. Perhaps I thought—how do I know—that by marrying her I should bring myself ever so little nearer to you, should have a chance of touching your hand, of hearing your voice once or twice a twelvemonth, should have a right to feel that I was at least *something* to you—the low-born husband that your cousin had stooped to marry... My God!" he interrupted himself, "mustn't the manhood have left a man before he can degrade himself by words like these!" Then he stopped short.

Katharine Fane's head drooped low. "If you degrade yourself,"

she said, "you degrade me more. In such a position as ours, for me to be forced to listen to your words is a humiliation greater than I will bear. You will not meet me as a friend, I see plainly, and so, except in the presence of others, we will never meet at all. If—if all you say were true," she added ; "if indeed you cared for me, sir, you would not subject me to pain like this !"

"Miss Fane," answered Steven, slowly and deliberately, "what you say is perfectly true ; if I loved you as I once did, I could not, I dare not open my lips to give you pain—but I do not !" She gave a start and looked up piteously in his face ; looked with an expression that seemed to cry : "Stab me with your bitter words, humiliate me with your contempt, do anything but cease to love me !" But Steven went on resolutely : "No, I do not. Poor Miss Dora will command my duty, as I told you, and such feeling as I have for you isn't likely to change. The woman I *loved* is dead. Yes," he repeated blankly, "dead, or rather, she never lived at all save in my own ignorant fancy. I got her picture months ago, Miss Fane ! I saw a pair of beautiful eyes, a soft-cut mouth, and I said those were eyes that could love honestly, lips that could speak brave words, and give a man brave kisses, and if I could win them they should be mine. Savage though I was, I had my own poor notions, you see, as to the qualities a true woman should possess, and in my folly I gave them all to Dora Fane—to the picture I mean, that night and day lay upon my heart."

Steven's voice had softened to its old tremulous, pleading tone ; and Katharine's bowed head sank lower still. After a minute : "Well, I came back," he went on, more calmly, "came back, and you know the rest ! I met poor Miss Dora, and I felt that I was just as indifferent to her as to any woman I had ever seen in my life, I met——"

"Oh, go on," cried Katharine, as he hesitated. "Let nothing be omitted from your story. You saw the original of the picture, and found that she did not possess the fine qualities of your beau ideal. Is that what you would say ?"

"I saw the original of the picture," said Steven, "fairer than I *had thought to find her*, gracious, kind, and with a voice sweeter, if

that could be, than her face—but all on the surface ! A woman of the world, a woman to lure men on with her beauty alone, living for herself and for her own vanity, excellently suited, I've no doubt, for the position of life she is going to marry into ; and so—you know after what death pangs ! my love, my reverence, not my madness, has passed away. The woman I dreamed of once is dead ;" saying which, he took the locket that held Katharine's photograph from his breast. "I have no right to wear her picture. The real Dora, God help her ! is all I have got to think of now." And as he spoke, quietly, not without dignity, Steven Lawrence put down the locket on the mantelpiece, and walked a step or two away from Miss Fane's side.

If he had raised his hand to strike her, the blow could scarcely have caused her humiliation so intense as thrilled through poor Katharine's heart in this moment. She had been accustomed hitherto to the way in which men of shallower passions, of finer breeding than Steven's, take their doom ; to being told that in spite of her cruelty, she would ever remain an ideal of all earthly and divine perfection ; her picture the dearest possession left to console the sufferer—with other like phrases in use in drawing-room love. This plain, coarse avowal that while Steven's "madness" for her remained unaltered, his blind respect, his chivalrous reverence for her was over, seemed to her the cruelest of insults. Yet still—incomprehensible mystery of love—Katharine Fane knew, even in the depth of her bitterness, that it was more possible to forgive him so, than if respect, if reverence, had continued intact and a fairer face than hers had led his senses captive.

"I never gave you my picture, Mr. Lawrence. Remember, it has been of your own free will that you have chosen to wear it. Nothing is easier than to take it out. See, I bear no malice ! I will do it for you myself."

She took up the locket, raised its glass, and in another instant the photograph, Steven's companion day and night for so many months, was torn neatly into four pieces, and thrown into the fireplace. Just as the sacrifice was completed came the patter of Dot's high-heeled slippers along the passage, and Katharine, in a sort of guilty confu-

sion, and not remembering what she was about, hid away the locket in her hand.

"I am so sorry I couldn't come sooner!" cried Dot, as she tripped in, quite a picture of white muslin and cherry-coloured bows, and with a Mimi Pinson plate of lace on her short fair hair. "Oh, Kate is here! then I know you haven't missed *me*. How d'y'e do, dear Steven?" Dot was not a foolishly shy person, and held up her face to her lover no more embarrassed by the presence of a third person than if she had been awaiting a kiss from Uncle Frank. "Now mind—I shall be horribly, dreadfully angry unless you tell me this instant every word you have both been saying."

It was a plain gold locket that Steven had bought, second-hand, from the store of a Jew pawnbroker in Vera Cruz; a locket whose intrinsic worth was certainly not more than twenty-five shillings, and throughout the whole remainder of that day Katharine Fane felt sorely puzzled what to do with her unlawful possession. To return it empty to its owner was a cruelty that, whatever his deserts, she could not practise towards him; give it to Dora her heart would not let her! So the only course left practically open seemed to be, to keep it herself. Some day, she thought, when Steven's senses had returned, she might give it to him; he would be Dot's husband then; and perhaps with her own picture in it once more, as a peace-offering. He might be willing to take back in friendship what he had flung away from him in love!

And when night came and she was alone, Miss Fane opened an inner drawer of her trinket-case, and, quite apart from diamonds, pearls, sapphires, and the rest of Lord Petres' gifts, hid the locket away. A branch of withered wild roses lay at its side.



CHAPTER XXVII.

MARRIED.

THEY never met alone after this day. Every forenoon, at the same hour precisely, Steven arrived, to go through his courtship; occasionally *was made to stay* for lunch; once or twice came, by set

invitation, to dinner. But Katharine saw him alone no more. She was thoroughly gracious to him, in her manner, before Dora ; with a generosity that alternately angered and stabbed him with contrition did her utmost to bring out whatever good there was in her cousin's character in his presence ; whenever it chanced that strangers were by would show, by a sweet and unaffected familiarity towards him, that Dora's own relations, at least, saw no misalliance in the approaching marriage. " If she has no heart," he would say to himself, every time he quitted her, " she is so perfect an actress, has a tact so excellent in her way of imitating one, that a man might pass his life in heaven at her side, and never be sensible of the deficiency." The very quality, in short, which he had held to be the canker, the flaw of her nature, becoming a new and cogent reason for him to love her the more.

The engagement, happily, was not a long one. The business arrangements connected with the marriage were soon over, Steven absolutely refusing to touch a farthing of his betrothed's small dowry, and insisting that capital and interest should be left in her hands ; and after this (a week in London having sufficed to buy more silks and laces than there seemed a possibility of ever wearing in Ashcot) Dot began to think that she need not make the poor fellow wait any longer. October was a pleasant month in Paris—cool, yet sufficiently summer-like to be out of doors all day ; it was an idle time, too, dear Steven said, on the farm, and everything at Ashcot would be ready by then for her reception. As well let the first of October, a fortnight from the present time, be fixed on for the wedding day. Laces and silks being temporarily in abeyance, the question of wedding-guests was next an all-important one to Dot's mind. Katharine's advice was to keep the marriage absolutely private ; none but members of their own family present, or such friends of Steven's as he chose to invite. But to this Dora would not listen. " It looks exactly as if we were ashamed of it," she said. " When you are married to Lord Petres you may have a hundred guests or six, and the world will call it right. In marrying a man like Steven, unless I take up a position at first, show that I mean to raise him to *my class* instead of sinking to his, no one will ever visit me at all. I

am quite determined to have the Ducies for bridesmaids, and Lady Haverstock and everybody else at the breakfast. As to asking any of Steven's friends," added Dot, "it is out of the question. I have spoken to him about it, and he wishes to leave every arrangement regarding the wedding in my hands."

And so to poor Katharine fell the task of bringing the Ducies of Ducie, proud old Lady Haverstock, and "everybody else," together at the wedding-feast of Steven Lawrence of Ashcot! A less gifted tactician would certainly have failed in the attempt. The older people remembering the Lawrences as plain working yeomen—at a time when yeomen, as a class existed—would almost as soon, under ordinary circumstances, have thought of appearing at the marriage of a day-labourer. Younger ones looked upon Steven much as they looked upon Mills the horsedealer, or any other of Lord Haverstock's boon-companions in the village; and had cards or invitations been sent out in the usual fashion it is doubtful whether a single acceptance would have been the result. Katharine's line of diplomacy was this: She rode over alone one morning to see Lady Haverstock, had a long confidential talk with her about the marriage, then just as she was leaving, asked the old lady, affectionately, if she would be present at it. "Steven Lawrence is not, I dare say, what these good people—people, half of them of yesterday themselves! would call a gentleman," said Katharine, "so we shall have a very quiet homely wedding. Lord Petres, I hope will be here for it, and his sister, if Lord Scudamore is better. Dear Lady Haverstock I hope *you* will please Dora and mamma by coming to the church to look at us?"

Lady Haverstock, with Katharine holding her hand and waiting for her reply, could of course do nothing but accept: and after this no further invitations were sent out. People began to talk, to wonder, to feel angry that they were not asked. "Lady Haverstock and her son, and Lord Petres," said the Miss Ducies of Ducie, "and the Countess of Scudamore, and to leave *us* out! We had better go and call. It would be very disagreeable to have any coolness with the Hilliards now"—that Katharine Fane was engaged to marry Lord Petres! So the Miss Ducies came to call, asked in tones of interest about Dora's wedding-dress; were quite anxious to know

Mr. Steven Lawrence ; had seen him several times with Lord Haverstock, and thought him so like the picture of the Emperor of Austria—was it possible Miss Fane did not see the likeness ? finally were told by Katharine that they might come to Clithero Church arrayed in natural flowers and white muslin dresses on the first, if they chose. With Lady Haverstock and her son as guests, and the Miss Ducies as bridesmaids, the difficulty now was rather whom to leave 'out than whom to invite. Everybody accepted : everybody, if they did not think Steven like the Emperor of Austria, thought him a young man of decided promise, a young man whose future after he married Dora Fane would lie in his hands ; and as the day approached, Dot, with an exultant heart felt that a dozen of the most exclusive people in Kent, people many of whom had not gone to Arabella's wedding would be present at hers.

A dozen or fifteen irreproachable people as wedding guests ; Lord Haverstock—for this Dora herself had intrigued—as best man ; with Katharine, the two Miss Ducies, and old Grizelda Long, the Phantom, as she was more generally called among her friends, as bridesmaids . . . But as Grizelda is destined to play a part of greater importance than that of bridesmaid in Steven's marriage, she must be allowed to make her bow with formality on first appearing before the footlights.

Who was Grizelda Long ? Had she a mother—had she a brother ? No one knew. She had gone on leading her phantom nomadic existence until people had ceased to speculate whether she had human relationships or not ; had ceased, indeed, to regard her otherwise than as a dispensation of Providence, an ultimate fact incapable of solution or analysis. A dreaded presence which even a woman like Mrs. Dering had not the courage to expunge from her balls and at homes—it was at wedding festivities, above all others, that the face of Grizelda Long (like the flower-crowned death's-head of the Egyptians) was certain of being seen. The clerk and pew-opener at St. George's knew her well ; to the young men from Gunter's she was familiar as one of the plaster-of-paris devices upon their own cakes. If a bride was making a good marriage Grizelda must not be left out, *because the poor dear creature had really been so indefatigable*

in running about to match silks and spur on milliners for the trousseau, and besides, would have *such* malicious things to say unless bought off with a bridesmaid's locket. If a bad one, Grizelda must come because she was just one of those amphibious creatures, those human connecting links, who are so convenient, as padding, or buffers, to put between different strata of guests at a breakfast-table. You might have slipped Grizelda in between a bishop and the most scandalously vulgar of the bridegroom's relations, and by virtue of her apologetic mild flatteries to his lordship, her mysterious latent affinities with the abominable new cousin—have offended neither. What were Grizelda's means of life? There were people who had been intimate with her for a dozen years or more who could not answer that question. It was whispered that, somewhere Knightsbridge way, there existed a modest establishment, half-lodging, half-boarding house, an establishment held together by a forlorn old maid or two, and chance Indian widows, and of which poor Grizelda was, in fact, the chief. But these were whispers only. No ordinary human creature could for certain have discharged these domestic duties and at the same time have haunted every ball and wedding and flower-show about town as did Grizelda. And many persons held it was but the weird ubiquity, the unholy will-'o-the-wisp-like habits of the creature in pervading, or appearing to pervade, every house of every one she knew at once, which first called the Knightsbridge legend into existence.

No one could, with an approximation to accuracy, fix the epoch at which Grizelda first appeared on the earth. Middle-aged matrons, mothers of tall boys and girls, could distinctly remember her flitting to and fro, match-maker and match-marrer, by turns, in the love-affairs of their youth. Accurate old gentlemen, when closely questioned, would not distinctly swear to any given year in which Grizelda was *not*. The young and flippant openly believed her to be a sort of unshriven houseless soul, a wandering female Jew who had roamed, partnerless, through ball-rooms, an unmated bridesmaid through weddings, from the beginning of time. Grizelda pursued you throughout a whole London season. For three months you could scarcely go to a ball without seeing the well-known battered

wreath, the well-known battered face peering, eager-eyed, through folding-doors, and up and down staircases after the young men who had promised (not always unsolicited) to give her a dance, and when the time came, fled ! And you went to the Rhine or Paris and found her there—"travelling with friends," Grizelda would say ; in reality, part-dragonness, part-courier, to some young woman, or women, not quite strong-minded enough to travel alone, and who found the good Grizelda, whether as foil, blind, interpreter, or friend, useful. There was no need to be troubled with conversation-guides or polyglot washing-books when you had got dear Grizelda of your party. For the purposes of luggage or the laundry she could speak any amount of execrable foreign tongues ; and then, it was so impossible to offend Grizelda ! And she was so indefatigable in beating up or making acquaintance for you in continental towns, so good in sleeping up five pair of stairs, or on a sofa, or in going to church when every one else was tired, or in fighting over the hotel bills, and it would be so easy to have done with her when you got back to town ! This last clause, however, while wishing to pay every other tribute to her virtues, I am disposed to dispute wholly. When Miss Long had once fastened on a friend she generally held to him, and with no wavering grasp. You might ask Grizelda to your house and she would come, and malign you meekly to every one next day or you might not ask her, and she would malign you more meekly still, and regretting that your acquaintances were not *quite* what she cared to meet. But you could not have done with her. People who in the heart of a German forest or on the top of Mont Blanc weakly asserted such a thing to be possible would confess afterwards, in sackcloth and ashes, that they had reckoned without their guest. Snubbing only brought the Phantom with additional humility to your doorstep ; cutting was no more fatal to her than to an earthworm : desperate under her persecution, if you laid a cruel hand on whatin any other human being had been pride or self-respect, Grizelda would walk away, as unscathed as the daddy-long-legs who, in quiet unconcern, leaves one of his limbs still quivering under your finger !

Perhaps a little real honest kindness might have exorcised her, as

holy water is said to exorcise other phantoms ; but this poor Grizelda never got. People invited her ; travelled with her ; made every kind of use of her ; gave her handsome presents ; believed " she was good-hearted, and made mischief more from desire of bringing herself forward than out of malice." But no one liked her. Was this a proof of her demerits ? if, instead of being lodged in that curiously unlovely tenement, Grizelda Long's thirst for action and dauntless courage had been the portion of a fairer woman, might not she—when she and time were in their youth—have been loved, and so done well ? Turned into legitimate channels were not the elements of more than common worth in this restless, energetic, sympathy-craving nature that now had soured and hardened into what it was after long contact with poverty and the world ? If the Knightsbridge legend had—as I believe it had—truth in it, did that tell no story of pathetic under-currents in Grizelda's life ? When the old face at which Cornet Lightfoot (invited to the ball through Grizelda's agency) had laughed with his gay little partner of seventeen last night—when the old face that had looked so incongruous under its flowers and in the gas-light got up in the early grey next morning to see after the poor menial duties of the household—that the charwoman had carried home no broken meats over-night, that the sardines and new-laid egg were ready for the capricious Indian widow, the stay of the house—must there not have been something almost heroic in its expression ? The world has no time to make suppositions—to give credit for bushel-hidden or potential virtues. Grizelda Long was a bitter-tongued old maid who had once, centuries ago, managed to get herself into society and had miraculously kept her head above water ever since : a creature plain to look at, disagreeable to be with, but whom even Mrs. Dering was afraid to leave out of her parties—a creature, in fine, whom every one shook hands with, and whom no one liked ! The hard work in the Knightsbridge boarding-house, the courage that could bravely wear a silk dress over an empty stomach, the craving to be up and doing that, in default of other excitement, would make poor old Grizelda head a band of school-children on Wimbledon Common, or collect money from house to house to build a *pauper church* in St. Giles's . . . None of these things did

the world see or take into account. Even Katharine Fane, of all human creatures the aptest to divine whatever real good lay in man or woman, never could bring herself to see ought but the unloveliness of Grizelda Long!

"Of course every one you wish to have at your wedding shall come," she said to Dora, "even the Phantom; but why not ask her as a guest only? All your other bridesmaids will be young, and tolerably good-looking, remember. Could anything be more grotesque than to see Grizelda Long in white muslin and with natural flowers in her hair, walking at the side of little Alice Ducie?"

But Dora was obstinate. If Grizelda came at all it must be as a bridesmaid. Grizelda would be horribly affronted at finding herself ranked with Mrs. Ducie and the other elderly wedding guests; and Dora would run no risk of forfeiting her good will. Grizelda knew numbers of people in London and Paris; knew people all over the world; and the bride-elect, looking forward already to sometimes quitting her husband and Ashcot, foresaw that the day might come in which even the Phantom could be of use to her.

That day, alas! came sooner than Dora herself expected.

Golden September waned. There were bright soft noons, and glorious autumn sunsets, and nights with a ring of sharpness in the air, and a yellow harvest moon shining above the hazy foreland, and showing the low farm-walls of Ashcot, white and distinct across Clithero Bay. Never had days and nights seemed, each as it passed, so slow to Katharine; yet never, collectively, had they sped on so quick to an undesired end. The evening of the thirtieth came; for the last time she stood in her old place on the terrace; for the last time thought over the bitter sweetness of the "day that was dead!" Then came a few hours' broken sleep, a feverish dream of some wedding party, in which she could never tell whether Lord Petres or Steven was the bridegroom, and where now Dot, now the Phantom, now Alice Ducie, but never herself, stood before the altar, veiled, and in orange-blossoms; and then Katharine Fane came back abruptly to the truth? found the sun shining, and Dora standing by her bedside, and remembered, with a shudder, that it was Steven's wedding-day.

"A beautiful dry day!" cried Dot, as much excited about the weather as if she had been going to a flower-show or a garden-party. "Get up quick, Kate. I find Heath has sent my wreath too big after all, and I won't trust any one but you to alter it."

"Dear Dora," said Katharine, holding out her arms to her cousin, "I'm so glad that the sun shines to-day.

"So am I," said Dora, with sincerity. "An umbrella and overshoes would spoil the prettiest bride in the world!"

Millinery, even on her marriage morning, was the note that ever ran through all Dot's emotions. Honestly, I don't believe she remembered Steven's existence until she saw him waiting for her at the altar, so taken up was she in the white satin and wreath, the veil and bouquet, and Honiton to which, from her point of view, the bridegroom was but an adjunct. And Katharine must do everything for her! Dora's poor narrow heart hated Mrs. Hilliard's maid, with a hatred dating back from the time when this woman had altered the Parisian silk dress for little Kate, and would neither let her nor Mrs. Hilliard see her until she was dressed. "'Tis the last thing you will ever do for me, Kate," she said, as Katharine fastened on her veil and flowers. "I should have detested myself if any hands in the house but yours had dressed me to-day." And so difficult to please was Dot, so scrupulous about the folds of her veil, the arrangement of the little baby curls, the exact height at which her wreath must be placed upon her forehead, that Katharine had scarcely had time for more than a glance at her own face, white as the dress she wore, in the glass, when the Squire knocked at the door, and called out cheerily that the carriages were waiting, and if Dora meant to be married to-day she had no time to lose.

It was not a large wedding after all. Lord Petres had not yet returned to England, neither did his sister make her appearance—hence, such people as were left out regretted that those who went should have been invited by Miss Fane under false pretences. Mrs. Dering, as Dot had foretold, was suffering too severely from one of her old headaches to be able to do more than send her best wishes and a teapot and service, something really useful, to the bride. The *Squire, Dora, and Katharine* went in one carriage, the three brides-

maids in another ; and at the church, for Steven had expressed no wish to be additionally married at Shiloh, Lady Haverstock and her son, with about a dozen other guests, met them. Not a large but a very charming wedding public opinion said : did a wedding ever take place in the world that was not called charming ? A lovely bride, a handsome bridegroom, young Lord Haverstock as best man, the three prettiest girls in Kent as bridesmaids (long practice had taught poor Grizelda to bow her face down over her bouquet, and generally keep herself quiet and unseen), and no inauspicious tears or emotion of any kind to mar the effect of the ceremony.

When it was over, Steven, who throughout looked like a man in a dream, had twice to receive whispered admonitions from the old clerk before he collected himself sufficiently to offer his arm to his wife, and take her away to the vestry. "Very naturally," said the Clithero people, who were looking on from the body of the church, "Master Lawrence was a dissenter, and didn't know the ways of the gentry and the church-people." And not all the hand-shaking and congratulations he went through, when the signing of names was complete, seemed sufficient to rouse him to a sense of his happiness. Was he really overcome—not master of his own feelings—or only shy, poor fellow, and without manner ? The people wondered who had honoured him by attending his marriage. When the bride and bridegroom left the church the crowd of village people who were assembled outside gave a cheer, but it was not a very hearty one. Steven Lawrence marrying a niece of the Squire's lady was an event so out of all established order or precedence as to have upset the whole mental equilibrium of the parish ; and the cheer rang neither with the hearty respect men would have shown had Dora Fane married a gentleman, nor the honest frank sympathy they would have felt for Steven had he chosen his bride from his own class. He nodded to such of his old friends as he saw, all of whom looked hot and uncomfortable under the salutation ; then Katharine's school-children came forward, dressed in white, to strew flowers—a custom never seen before in Clithero and set down at once as black papistry : and after this Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence entered the Squire's carriage and drove away.

"It went off beautifully, did it not ?" cried Dot, much as if she had

been speaking of theatricals or a dinner-party. "But you were so absent, Steven; I am not sure that you saw whether I looked well or not."

"Indeed I saw you, my dear," said Steven, turning to her with a curious sort of pity on his face; "I saw you, and thought I had never seen you look so pretty before." And he took her hand, the bride first carefully transferring her bouquet and handkerchief to her lap, and gave it a grasp which almost brought the tears into Mrs. Lawrence's eyes.

What he answered was strictly true. He *had* looked at her as she walked up the aisle upon the Squire's arm: the brilliant skin, the great dark eyes, the golden baby-locks, all softened and made youthful under the bridal veil: and had thought he never saw poor Miss Dora look so pretty before. He had likewise wondered at what period of his life the vision of that doll-bride could have appeared before his eyes already. And in an instant—the wedding-party watching him, marvelling to see with what quiet good-breeding the yeoman bridegroom awaited his bride—memory had answered the question. Once, years ago, in new Orleans, he had gone in with some of his mates to see a show of dwarfs. "The real original General Lilliput and his family," said the advertisement: at all events, an assemblage of mature human creatures between three and five feet in height. And of this pitiful group the principal lady had been dressed as a bride: "The same dress," according to the showman, "that she wore on the occasion of her marriage with the illustrious General." Well, the tiny hands, the consequential walk, the floss-silk hair, the two pink cheeks of this poor morsel of humanity, all came vividly back before Steven as his bride approached the altar: the resemblance heightened when he heard Dot's voice, harsh and disproportioned as had been the small lady's in the New Orleans show, pronouncing the first necessary "I will." And the grotesque likeness so haunted him throughout the ceremony, that even when he was on his knees receiving the rector's blessing, it was by an effort that he brought himself to feel the sacredness of the place and of what he was about and not smile. During these ten minutes, which hung a millstone round his neck for ever—which separated him irrevocably from the woman he loved, all he remembered was

that show in New Orleans ! all he felt was the absurd outward incongruity between himself and the kneeling baby of thirty at his side ! Probably if some of the men who have gone to execution so staunchly could have recorded their experience when it was over, they would have told us it was a little stain upon the axe, an accidental irregularity of the cord, which occupied their senses at the last.

"I only looked at you once," said Dot, after a time, finding it necessary, if conversation was to be kept up at all, that she should start a subject, "and then, Steven, I declare I thought you were smiling. But perhaps it was my own agitation—you know I saw through my tears."

"Your—your tears ?" answered the bridegroom, absently : a sharp turn in the road had brought into sight the carriage immediately behind them—the carriage which held Katharine Fane . . . and after this neither of them spoke again till they reached the Dene.

"After all, what can one have to talk about ?" thought Dot, leaning back, and resigning herself to visions of her travelling dress : "The situation admits of no subject of interest. My violet velvet suit—yes, I'm glad the day is turning chilly ; nothing looks so English as velvet under a hot sun—violet toquet, white plume—Great heavens !" for the first time to-day the bride's heart beat quick : "I hope Williams has not packed my violet toquet away ! Did I—did I remember to tell her I had changed my mind about wearing a bonnet ?"

The breakfast went off after the manner of all wedding breakfasts. The bridesmaids of course ought to have taken their places in due form near the bride ; but Lord Haverstock, who had charge of Katharine, got shy and blind at finding himself among so many young women, and led her to the seat where she felt her white cheeks and trembling lips must be surest of notice ; exactly opposite, that is to say, to Steven and his wife. Mrs. Hilliard—half imagining herself a bride again, in her silver-grey dress and delicate white-lace draperies—sat and shed tears, and murmured about "Dossy," and glanced with hysterical meaning at Dora, until old Grizelda leant across with her smelling-salts and a sympathetic hope that Mrs.

Hilliard would be able to command *her feelings*, and only think of the beloved bride's happiness. The Squire, with real agitation, and real tears in his eyes, made a very bad speech ; the rector, with professional rhetoric, a very good one. Steven, when he was called upon, said a few words, at least up to the average of bridegroom speeches. Lord Haverstock went through torture horrible to his mother to witness on behalf of the bridesmaids. Finally, Mrs. Hilliard looked at the bride, who rose, blushed, fluttered away from the table, and half an hour later was standing in the drawing-room (suit, toquet, plume, all complete) kissing her dear aunt Arabella, kissing the Miss Ducies, kissing Grizelda, kissing and being kissed by everybody amidst a multitude of farewells.

Well—who shall say how it chanced?—just at this affecting moment of leave-taking the bridegroom, coming out of the dining-room, ran face to face against the principal bridesmaid, who happened to be crossing the hall, on some last errand she had to execute for Dora.

“Good-bye,” said Steven, standing still, and looking at her hard. “Say good-bye to me here, not before all those people.”

Katharine raised her eyes to his, and tried to speak, but could not get out a word. Her lips twitched : her hand turned cold and clammy, as Steven caught and held it in his own.

“Good-bye, and the Lord pardon you !” he said, with a suspicion nearer to the truth than he had ever known before dimly breaking on him. “Katharine !” . . . and then a door close beside them opened. The hands that, save in friendship, must never meet again, were parted. All was over.

This was their last farewell. Katharine took her leave of Dora alone, in Mrs. Hilliard's morning-room ; and, when the bride and bridegroom drove away, Steven looked in vain, among the crowd of people who stood at the hall-door to see the happy pair start, for her face.

The blood ran in his veins with fever-heat as the carriage bore them along the quiet autumn-scented lanes towards the railway. He forgot “poor Miss Dora ;” forgot that he was her husband : forgot everything but the trembling perfect lips, the clay-cold hand of *Katharine Fane*. If he might go back, he thought ; hear her say ,

"I love you, Steven ;" feel her arms round his neck, once—and then die ! he were well off. And, even while he thought this, he found himself on the platform at the station, mechanically counting bonnet-boxes under his wife's orders, with the station-master, clerk, porters, signalman, all staring at him as though, by marrying the Squire's niece, he had become a sort of natural phenomenon, or curiosity. After this came the shriek of the engine : more excitement from Dora about bonnet-boxes ; and then they were hurried into a carriage full (with a sense of relief he recognised this) of other passengers, and he knew that Katharine Fane and his love belonged for ever to the past, and that he had started on his wedding tour !

The tidal train, which would have taken them to Folkestone exactly in time to meet the boat, did not stop at the smaller country stations ; so they had been obliged to go by the afternoon mail, and when they reached Folkestone, there was still an hour and a half to spare before the steamer left. It was six o'clock ; the pale October daylight nearly gone ; and, after leaving their luggage at an hotel, Steven proposed that they should saunter out on the beach, to make the time pass.

"Ah—yes !" said Dot, not fond of walking at any time, and thinking especially at present of the dainty boots, the violet velvet, in which her journey to Paris was to be made. "It—it won't rain, I hope !" Then she put her hand, for the first time, under her husband's arm, and, somewhat silently, they went away together for their walk.

There had been rough winds for two or three days before in the channel ; and, though it was dead calm now, the tide rolled in with heavy breakers on the beach. Nothing can well be mournfuller than the neighbourhood of the sea in weather like this ; oppressive silence for a minute ; then, one prolonged wild sob along the shore ; then, silence again ; and a grey sky overhead ! an expanse of grey, cold water stretching before you, dim and spectre-like, in the twilight ! When they had walked some distance—miles it seemed to Dora, who was tortured by the shingle, and almost running to keep pace with Steven's long stride—"I—I don't like the sound of the sea at all," *she* cried. "It looks calm, but I'm certain there is a heavy swell

somewhere, and nothing makes me so ill as a swell." Dot entertained true French horror of the sea and sea-sickness. "Now, do you think I shall suffer dreadfully, Steven?"

Steven had not heard the first part of what she said, and stopped short. "Suffer? my dear, you shall never suffer, if I can help it!" he said, stooping down over her, and with a new, pitying kindness in his tone. Something at this instant; the pressure of her hand, perhaps: her faltering voice, for she was really tired and out of breath, had, for the first time to-day, reminded him that Dora was not merely a puppet in the wedding-show, but a poor, helpless, little woman, dependent on his affection for the happiness or misery of her future life! And all the manliness of his nature was stirred up by the thought. *She* was his wife. *She*, Dora Fane—not Katharine—had had the courage to love him before the world; to cast in her lot, for good or for evil, with his. "If I can shield you, Dora, you shall never know what it is to suffer again!" And he caught her: for it was dark, and they had wandered far away from houses: and held her almost passionately to his breast.

"Oh—dear Steven!" cried Dora, in a stifled voice. "I know you will be everything that is good to me, only——"

"Only?" said poor Steven, still holding her to his side. "Tell me, Dora; let there be no secrets between us from the first."

"Only my feather," said Dora, putting her hand up to the velvet toquet. "You know, dearest, this is the hat I have got to travel in to Paris!"



CHAPTER XXVIII.

BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.

"We are perfectly happy," wrote the bride at the end of a week. "The weather is delightful, Paris full—I will tell you about dress when I see you—and Steven everything that is kind and good. What a pity the only place fit to live in on earth should be so expensive! My dear Kate, tell Uncle Frank *the whole* of his present is *gone already*, and our hotel bill not paid. To give you an idea

of prices—bonnets, small as they are, cost sixty francs. Sixty francs for about three square inches of blond and tulle, and you can't get one *under* ! I don't think, on the whole, dearest Steven is as pleased with Paris as I expected him to be."

"And shows his sense too," said the Squire, as Katharine read aloud this part of her cousin's letter. "I'll tell you what, Kate ; if they were in any other place in the world and Dot talked of cash running short, I should send some as a matter of course—I know very well Lawrence can't be over-flush of ready-money just now—but the best thing that can happen to them in Paris is—to be obliged to leave it. Sixty francs for three inches of tool !" cried the Squire, testily ; "and what need will she have of tool at Ashcot, I should like to know ? If her husband wants money to drain his land—and he'll never get a crop until it is drained—I'll help him to every shilling he asks me for ; but I'll not help Mrs. Dora to three-inch Paris bonnets. Give her my love, Kate, and say we expect her home at the end of the fortnight."

The message was given ; and five days later old Barbara received a letter from the new Mrs. Steven, to say that they would be back on the sixteenth. "Have something to eat in the house," wrote Dot, in a Napoleonic style that stirred Barbara's wrath to its very depths, "a raised pie or cold pheasant will do, as I can't tell you what hour we shall arrive ; and make fires throughout the house, and keep the windows open." Every one of which commands Barbara, I need scarcely say, disobeyed flatly. Where was she to get raised pies and pheasants ? The master's favourite dish was cold boiled beef and pickles, and cold boiled beef and pickles should be ready for him. As to fires, Barbara had never lit a fire till November yet—except in sickness—and was not going to begin any such extravagance now. And for open windows ! she supposed she knew when to open a house and when to shut it without being taught by Steven's fine-lady wife.

All the jealous pride of poor old Barbara's heart Dot, with her inherent want of tact, had contrived to ruffle in three or four careless lines ; and when the evening of the sixteenth came, and the *bride and bridegroom* returned, Steven found, before he had been

home ten minutes, that his wife and Barbara were enemies, and that his house, as in the old days of Mrs. Joshua and his mother, was to be a battle-field.

"You must make allowances for her, Dora," he said, when Barbara, her head erect as a war-horse, had set down a huge piece of beef before them, then stalked in silence from the room. "We must get some younger woman from the village, I see, to wait upon you, and in the meantime make allowances for Barbara. You will find the old soul honest, and true as steel, when you come to know her better."

"But because the old soul is true as steel is no reason that I am to eat beef as hard as iron!" retorted Dot. "My dear Steven, you may depend upon it old servants are mistakes. We had an old housekeeper at the Dene once, and Uncle Frank was always obliged to ask what day he might be allowed to give a dinner-party. No one values honesty more than I do," added Mrs. Lawrence, "but I value health more, and cold salt beef is just one of the few things I *cannot* digest."

"Then I will tell Barbara not to give you salt beef again, my dear," said Steven, going on with quiet good appetite at his own dinner. "She knows it is a dish I like, and I suppose got it to please me."

"After I had written and told her to have a pie, or game, or something light for me! and to have fires lit, and the windows open!" cried Dot. "Not one of which orders has she attended to! Steven, is that old creature to be mistress of the house, or am I?"

"You are to be mistress of the house, and of everything and everybody in it," answered Steven, with the good humour of a man not vitally interested in his subject. "Barbara, as I need not tell you, will stay here always, and you must learn to manage her, my dear. Have what you choose for dinner, have the fires lighted, and the windows shut or open—but please yourself in everything."

And this was the tone of all his replies in future to his wife's complaints. The sunny October weather turned before long to chill wind and rain, and Dot, shut up in-doors with only her finery to amuse her, and with old Barbara's sullen face for companionship, became

about as much bored as you could well imagine a bride to be. Steven was out of doors from morning to night, either at his farm-work, of which there was plenty on his hands, or shooting, or breaking in his horses for the coming hunting-season ("like [a man possessed," his wife would say to him, "you seem afraid to sit quiet for five minutes together with your own thoughts !") ; but of an evening, and at his meals, he had very little save complaints to listen to. It was horribly dull. It was very strange none of the country people came to call. It was very selfish of Kate to chose this time to be away—Katharine was staying with Mrs. Dering at Brighton. For ten days Dora had sat in different lovely Parisian dresses of an afternoon, and not seen the face of a single visitor yet. What *did* make the parlour fire burn so badly ! Was it necessary for her to walk all the way to Shiloh on Sunday, or not ? And to these, and to a hundred more small discontents, the tone of Steven's answers was ever the same. He was sorry no one had called. He would have a new grate put in the parlour. It was not at all necessary for Dora to walk to Shiloh on Sunday unless she liked. And then away out of doors again the moment his food was swallowed, to remain there till next meal time, or until nightfall brought him perforce into the house again.

"If he would only contradict me sometimes !" Dot would think when he was gone. "Contradict me, and not get everything done with such horrible obedience, and—and try to look up some one—something in the shape of amusement for me !" Then, after gazing wearily through the wet windows at the wetter garden, she would go away to her room, to look over her dresses and her bonnets, and speculate as to her chance of wearing them, and wonder whether a wedding-ring and a house of your own, and a change of surname *did* make the country one jot more endurable or not ?

With November came a glimpse of brighter weather ; and at last, one fine afternoon, Mrs. Ducie of Ducie came to call at Ashcot. Dot, heroic in her small way, and undisheartened by three weeks of fruitless labour at her glass, was elaborately dressed, embroidering at her parlour fire, when these, her first visitors, were ushered in by Barbara's grim voice. She had studied a new way of wearing her short

fair locks, in Paris, which gave her more than ever the porcelain marchioness air. Her complexion, helped by friendly half-light, was beautifully carmine and pearl ; her dress, her ear-rings, her brooch—all were in the reigning mode of Paris eccentricity, and all, worn by Steven Lawrence's wife at Ashcot, looked about as much out of place as old Barbara, driving in a fine carriage, would have looked in Rotten Row, or in the Champs Elysées.

Nothing could be more civil than the manner of Mrs. Ducie and her daughters. They were quite pleased to see Mrs. Lawrence looking so well ; had no idea Ashcot was so delightfully situated ; hoped they would soon see her at Ducie, but, if Mr. Lawrence was busy, she must not think about returning a formal visit—and, as soon as they left the house, fell to wondering at Mrs. Lawrence's want of taste and good-feeling in dressing as she did. A plain, neatly-made black silk, a sensible merino, would have looked so much better in that homely farm parlour ; and oh, what a pity Miss Fane, or *some one* who cared for her, did not tell the poor little woman to be less theatrical, less meretricious in her style of making-up !

So decided Mrs. and the Miss Ducies ; while Dora watching their grand carriage and livery-servants, as they drove away, asked herself if the best county society was a prize, when it took the form of morning visits, of very great intrinsic worth, after all ! The Ducies had been perfectly civil, perfectly kind ; but Steven's wife was acute enough to detect the tone of patronage which ran through all the civility and all the kindness. They had visited her, as the Squire and Kate visited the other farmer's wives at Christmas, as Steven Lawrence's wife, in short, not as Lord Vereker's grand-daughter ; and the first tears Dora had shed since her marriage rose into her eyes at the mortification of this thought.

A day or two later, came old Lady Haverstock, who stayed exactly seven minutes, and urged Mrs. Lawrence to take an active part in the village clothing-club, mainly on the ground that this charity was not confined to church-people, but open to all sects and denominations ("as if I care for sects and denominations !" thought Dot). And after this, one by one, the other people who had been present at her *wedding-breakfast* called or left cards ; and Mrs. Lawrence knew that

[illegible]

varied lot when she looked back to it (autumn rain against the window, and only the burring tick of the old kitchen clock to interrupt her thoughts) from her lonely parlour at Ashcot. Beating clothes, winter and summer, in the cloudy waters of the Bièvre might not be in itself a genial employment; but at all events those bands of French girls beat in company, and chattered of their lovers, and laughed gaily as they worked, and had their balls on Sunday, and society and some kind of excitement all the days of the week. The lot of people on the stage had ever seemed to Dot one with which, despite its hard work and scanty pay, she had been well contented. And the life of a woman of the world like Mrs. Dering—a life with money, good position, society, operas, balls, fashionable church-going—ah, how easy it would have been to *her* to be a good wife and pleasant hostess, and admirable member of society, in a position like that! Anything but solitude, absence from human faces, remoteness from the show and noise and movement of the world. Anything but the self-contained, unbroken life which in these early days of marriage, a young wife, if love be in her heart, wishes so fondly, so jealously to prolong!

Thus went by the first few weeks of Dot's new existence. She possessed too little depth of feeling to be really and acutely unhappy. The coldness that Steven's patient kindness to her so thinly masked gave her slight concern; the consciousness of her own chill and bankrupt heart did not corrode her peace. Her life was dull—duller even than it had been before her marriage; this was all.

And still, and while she would run a dozen times a day to meet her husband with a kiss, and while she had spoken to no younger man than old Mr. Lyte the minister since her return to Ashcot Steven's future rival already existed in Dora's imagination. "If a man of my own class, of my own ideas had married me," was her constantly recurring thought, "rich or poor, loving or not loving him, I should at least have some society, at least have the possibility of amuse before me yet."

And : gh she never, even to herself, admitted that it was so, the ma her own class and of her own ideas meant—a man like ~~the~~ Whyte.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OUT OF TUNE !

MEANWHILE Mr. Clarendon Whyte himself was walking about the Brighton cliff, beautiful as ever, with faultless gloves, Hyperion locks and perfumed cambric, or taking his varied drive from Hove to Kemptown, and from Kemptown to Hove, in that mail-phaeton with its pair of roans, for which no man has yet known how Clarendon Whyte paid—perfectly oblivious that such a person as Dora Lawrence existed.

If, as Dora to the last hour of her life believed, he had really cared for her before Arabella adroitly turned his affection aside, it must be conceded that Arabella had effected the work of alienation thoroughly. Mr. Clarendon Whyte was just as devoted an adherent to the Dering household here at Brighton as in the days when Dora shared, or believed she shared, his attentions in town ; rode with Mrs. Dering when the General was too gouty to mount his horse ; walked with her when the evening air was too sharp for the General's asthma ; drove out her eldest boy twice a week in his mail-phaeton, and dutifully ate all such meals as he was invited to eat in Mrs. Dering's house. The world still observed its old charitable reticence on the score of this friendship ; chiefly, no doubt, because Mrs. Dering was one of those women about whom there *can* be no scandal of moment, a little, perhaps, because Clarendon Whyte's poverty shut him out from the surveillance of mothers of families—the class from whom handsome young matrons have ordinarily most to dread. It was, when one came to think of it, a very natural intimacy. Mrs. Dering was a thoroughly exemplary wife to the most disagreeable of old husbands. General Dering himself had grown quite fond of the young man's society. And so, when Miss Fane came down to Brighton about ten days after Steven's marriage, the first person she met was her adversary, Mr. Clarendon Whyte—Mr. Clarendon Whyte still received as a daily visitor, still installed in his post of laquais de place, as of old in her sister's establishment.

"And where is the city heiress, then ?" asked Katharine, the day after her arrival. "I had hoped Mr. Clarendon Whyte was married—gone and buried out of sight for ever—ages ago."

"The city heiress has proved faithless," answered Mrs. Dering, placidly, "if, indeed, she ever had any existence. I wrote you the tale as it was told to me ; and whether it was true, or only 'ben trovato,' Kate, we ought to be thankful for the effect it had on Dot. I was always afraid the poor little thing really liked Mr. Whyte in her heart."

"A pity she married Steven Lawrence if she did," said Katharine, bluntly. "No woman who had cared for Clarendon Whyte could love Steven, I am very certain."

"Love !" repeated Mrs. Dering, with the slightest possible sneer round the corners of her well-cut mouth. "My dear child, do you suppose for a moment Dora would have married any man for love ? It would have been bad for Steven—are we all to call Mr. Lawrence 'Steven,' by the bye ?—if she had. With a man like that it is far better that whatever attachment there is should be upon his side."

"I disagree with you entirely," cried Katharine. "Why do we ever speak on subjects like these ? We don't understand each other ; we talk in different languages ! I think it is a shame, a degradation for Steven Lawrence, or for any man, to know that the woman who is to be at his side till one of them dies came there for any other reason than love !"

"Well, Kate," said Mrs. Dering, "when you speak in that sort of way you certainly do use a different language to mine, or to that of any other reasonable being. Look round the world and say if all the happiest marriages you see are not those which began without a pretence of sentiment on either side. Sentiment is a very pretty thing, dear, and becomes you admirably, but it won't wear—trust me ! A sense of what is right and fitting ; prudence, principle—above all, principle—these are the only foundations for solid happiness in marriage."

"Principle, yes !" said Katharine dryly ; "but then, what do you mean by principle ? Selfish interest, expediency, worldly advancement, or what ?"

"By principle I mean *principle*," answered Mrs. Dering. "Don't let us attempt word-splitting on such a subject as this. You might almost as well ask me what I meant by right or wrong ?"

But, unfortunately, just as Mrs. Dering had taken this lofty moral stand, the entrance of Mr. Clarendon Whyte put a stop to the conversation ; and ten minutes afterwards Katharine left the house, as her habit was when he entered it, and went out with her small nieces and nephews to build castles on the beach.

She found the children's society more welcome than any other during the whole of her visit to Brighton. Mrs. Dering, seeing with real concern that her sister was pale and spiritless, got up constant little impromptu dissipations for her amusement ; and Katharine went bravely through them all. Dressed, and drove, and danced ; yes, sometimes flirted even, as of old ; then next morning, when she was with little Bell and Flossy on the beach, knew that these two hours of baby castle-building, and listening to baby-tongues, were the only hours worth anything to her out of the twenty-four !

Until three months ago her affection for Mrs. Dering had been almost romantic in its girlish depth and warmth. She could see no fault in Arabella, could detect no leaven of worldliness in her character ; could imagine no higher ideal to place before herself, when she should become Lord Petres' wife, than her sister. And now Mrs. Dering scarcely spoke without the sense, rather than the words, of what she said grating harshly on Katharine's heart ! She recognised—taught by she knew not what new wisdom—the real nature of all which to her sister was happiness ; saw, with newly-opened eyes, the true picture of a loveless mercenary marriage ; and knew, with a shudder, that where Mrs. Dering found contentment, she, in the same place, would find despair. Successes in society ; the admiration, the respect of the world ; the companionship of empty-headed fools like Clarendon Whyte ; these—with such well regulated affection as she had for her children—filled up the cup of Arabella's prosperous life. With General Dering she had scarcely more human sympathy than she had with his plate-chest. "And if I was in such a position," Katharine would take a bitter pleasure in saying to herself ; "if I was married to a man just not positively hateful to me, I would run away from him ! I would commit some great wickedness, and bring his life and my own to a crash, and glory in doing so ! But I would never live the mockery of a life Arabella does."

And then, after thinking these desperate thoughts, she would steal away upstairs to the nursery, take her youngest niece upon her lap, and hold her face down on the soft little baby head with a wistful, yearning tenderness, the like of which not all her love for children had ever called forth in her heart till now.

"I have had my one chance of happiness in life," she would think an hour later, when she was dressing for a ride or dinner-party, and her mood had changed, "and let it go. No woman, I suppose, has that sort of love offered to her twice, and I must just take the lot that I have chosen and make the best of it. Run away from Lord Petres when I'm married to him? bring things to a crash? What utter folly! I shall become like Arabella, of course, in time, and be happy with the measure of Arabella's happiness."

And in the meantime her spirits grew more fitful and her cheeks paler; and people began to say that the beautiful Miss Fane was losing her good looks, and must take care she did not play with Lord Petres too long if she wished to marry at all. These waxen complexions always went, alas! in a day when they did go. The Brighton doctor prescribed steel; the General pompously proposing an addition of cod-liver oil. Mrs. Dering despatched a letter bidding Lord Petres come over to England without delay. "My dear Kate is not positively ill," she wrote; "but I cannot say that I like her looks, and I am afraid she is a little depressed about herself. If you were to come, even for a day, suddenly, and without letting her know that I have written, I am sure that it would do her good."

Lord Petres had by this time returned to Paris, having gone through his usual autumnal course of mineral waters at the different baths; and three days after receiving Mrs. Dering's letter he travelled over dutifully from Calais to Dover, and from thence to Brighton. Brighton, I should say, was the one spot on the face of the globe which he detested most. The glare, the east winds, the nearness to the sea, the cookery to be met with at the hotels; everything in Brighton disagreed with Lord Petres to the very last degree: and it would be difficult to imagine any object more miserable and less lover-like than the poor little fellow presented on the keen November afternoon when he drove up before Mrs. Dering's

house on the East Cliff. An immense seal-skin wrapper entirely enveloped his small figure ; a pair of seal-skin gloves were on his hands ; the familiar half-shovel hat, without which Katharine had never seen him before, was replaced by a cloth travelling-cap, the flaps of which were tied down closely round his melancholy white face.

He was ushered, still in his wraps, into the drawing room where Katharine was alone at the piano, singing low to herself the same "Eurydice" in which Steven had interrupted her that morning at the Dene. "Lord Petres !" she cried, starting up, half inclined to laugh, half to cry in the surprise of seeing him. "Who in the world would have thought of seeing you ? and in Brighton too !"

"I have taken every precaution," said Lord Petres ; his slow solemn voice sounding more welcome, somehow, than it had ever done before to Katharine's ears. "And as I know that you are unprejudiced, Kate, I have ventured to present myself before you in my travelling-dress—armour, it may more justly be called, against the inclemency of the Brighton climate." Thus saying, Lord Petres took off his cap and gloves, and seated himself shivering before the fire. "If you will permit me," he remarked, after the usual kiss on the tips of Katharine's fingers, "I will, for the present, keep my great-coat on. I am obliged to observe the strictest care on account of the different mineral poisons which are at present in my system. You have not been to Vichy ? My dear Katharine, the effects of the Vichy waters are admirable in themselves—Duclos underwent a resurrection there—'tis the number of waters a man in my complicated state has to take after them that is the mischief. Vichy requires an after-course of Homburg, Homburg of Baden, Baden of Kissengen, and so on, until you become almost as much a walking pharmacopœia as if the physicians had had their way on you at home. Now tell me, perfectly frankly, how I look ?"

How he looked ? Any man but Lord Petres must have asked how *she* was ; have noticed *her* pale cheeks ; and Katharine felt grateful to her lover for his selfishness. Poor little Lord Petres ! she did like him very dearly after all. Eccentric, selfish, hypochondriacal though *he* was, *he* was real ; and reality, in the present sick state of Katha-

rine's soul, seemed to her the very salt of earthly virtues. "I think you look decidedly better, Lord Petres. You have almost a colour."

"The east wind flushes me, Katharine. You could have mentioned no worse symptom than my apparent colour."

"Well, then, you are stouter. I am quite sure you are stouter."

"Thank you," said Lord Petres, with quiet resignation; "I wished to learn the truth, and I knew I should get it from your lips. The object of the whole of the waters I have swallowed has been to reduce what you call my stoutness. They have failed. Let us talk of other subjects."

Katharine took a chair beside him, and they talked, or rather Lord Petres talked, of Vichy and Baden, the last shape in bonnets, and the last subject that he had been studying for his great work on social reform; the accustomed kind of small-talk which, from the first week of their engagement, had been the nearest approach ever made by Lord Petres to love-making. At last, Katharine as yet having borne little part beyond yes and no in the conversation:

"And so," remarked Lord Petres, with an amused little smile, "you did marry your cousin to the backwoodsman after all. Where are they? How are they getting on? On purely scientific grounds the future of those two singularly-mated persons will always be one worth watching."

"Steven Lawrence chose to propose to Dot, and Dot chose to accept him, as I told you in my letters," said Katharine, holding down her face. "I had nothing whatever to do with their engagement. They have returned to Ashcot. They spent their honeymoon in Paris, and, my cousin writes me word, enjoyed it wonderfully."

Lord Petres shook his head. "That theory about persons enjoying themselves wonderfully during honeymoons is one to which I have devoted a good deal of thought, and all my researches have irresistibly proved it to be a fallacy. I speak of men, you understand: to a certain class of women," said Lord Petres, "no legitimate opportunity of wearing a new dress every day is devoid of interest. But men! Now, why should any man—we will take the backwoodsman for an

example—enjoy that first enforced tête-à-tête with his wife which bears, ironically one would think, the name of honeymoon ? On what experience, what established fact in human nature, is the supposition based ?”

“I—I can quite believe that Dora wrote as she felt,” said Katharine, evading any general question about married happiness. “To be in Paris at any time, or under any circumstances, is Dot’s ideal of human beatitude. Poor little thing ! I really feel sorry when I think of her back in the country again.”

“Sorry for her, or for her husband, or for both ?”

Katharine did not answer, and Lord Petres looked attentively at her downcast face. “Ah,” said he presently, “marriage, under the most favourable auspices, is a very hazardous undertaking, Kate.”

“Very,” said poor Katharine, with an attempt at a smile.

“A much more hazardous undertaking than you thought six months ago ?”

“Yes,” she answered, not knowing what was to come next.

“I can tell all this from your face. You have been thinking more since I saw you last than you ever did before in your life, and the result of your thoughts has been to take away your colour and your spirits. Now, viewing the subject quite dispassionately, *do* you wish that you were free again ?”

She looked up at him with a start. “Free ! Lord Petres, am I to think—am I to understand . . . ?” she faltered.

Little Lord Petres put one of his white hands on hers. “Katharine,” he said, “from the first moment of our engagement I think we have spoken the truth to each other. We will do so still. I have not come to Brighton at this time of the year without a cause. Two or three days ago I got a letter from your sister, in which she told me that you were ill, and that letter brought me here.”

The blood flamed over Katharine’s face. “I wish Arabella would let us take care of our own affairs !” she cried. “Should I not have told you myself if there had really been anything important enough to bring you here ?”

“Well, Mrs. Dering seemed to think not,” said Lord Petres, quietly ;

"and in all these matters Mrs. Dering, I am sure, knows best. You are looking ill, and, notwithstanding my own feeble state, it was right, no doubt, that I should come and see you. Now we will condense what is to follow. We won't have a long scene, like lovers on the stage. You are young, Katharine, and not in love with me; you have been telling yourself so often of late; and you care not one jot about my being pretty well off. Do you wish to have back your freedom?"

From the lips of any other man living Katharine Fane's proud spirit would have resented this question as the cruellest indignity: from Lord Petres she took it straight as it came from his heart; a heart which, however limited its compass, however encrusted with sybarite selfishness, was crystal to its very depths where honour and where integrity was concerned. During their whole engagement, this was the moment, perhaps, in which Katharine Fane went nearest to loving him!

"You—you have asked me this too suddenly!" she stammered.

"Then take time to give me your answer," said Lord Petres. "I shall leave Dover by the last mail to-night (for I am travelling, Duclos with me, as men travel in Spain, and descend at no hotels on the road), and shall expect your answer, not later than four days hence, in Paris; expect it a little anxiously, as you may know, Kate."

She looked round at him with great tears trembling in her eyes. To lose the most trivial fealty that had once been hers was horribly bitter to Katharine Fane: to lose Lord Petres seemed the agony of death to her—now that Steven was lost too! "There is no affection for me in the world," she cried. "You . . . I did think you would be faithful to me always, and you wish already to give me up!"

She drew her hand away from him, and her voice broke down.

"Oh, dear me, *please* don't cry!" said Lord Petres, entreatingly, but turning away his head lest he should himself incur the risk of agitation. "I thought you did not care for me, Kate!—I thought it was only right I should give you a chance of escape; but *please* don't cry!"

"And please don't ever be so cruel to me again!" sobbed Katharine. "Not care for you, indeed! Ah, Lord Petres, what should I have left to care for if you were to forsake me now?"

... "And so the scene does end like a scene on the stage!" said Lord Petres. "I suppose the playwrights know what they are about after all. Now, the next thing is, when are we to be married?"

"Oh, that is quite another question," said Katharine, smiling, but with the big tears still on her cheeks. "Because I refuse, in spite of yourself, to give you your freedom, is no reason I wish you to be married at once."

"At once would be impossible," remarked Lord Petres, gravely, and coming back from the unaccustomed region of emotion and love-making to that of plain matter of fact. "I have just hired an apartment for the winter from some father or uncle of Duclos—hired it at an extravagant price I know, from the way Duclos speaks of his relation's honour and principles; but I had a serious suspicion the rascal meant to leave me unless I obeyed him, and 'tis but another form of raising his wages. The apartment will suit me admirably for the present, but I need scarcely tell you, Kate, is only large enough for a bachelor establishment."

"So Tangiers will not see anything of us for this winter," said Katharine. "Do you remember poor papa's first and last attempt at social diplomacy? We decided, then, you know, that courtship was the brightest season of life, and that we would prolong the brightest season to the utmost. Let us be of the same mind still."

Lord Petres deliberated for a minute or two in silence. "Katharine," he said at last, "it is absurd to speak of courtship between persons who do not court, and absurder still to believe that any season of life can be bright to a man in my state of health. On referring to my diary this morning I found that we have been engaged exactly one year eleven months and twelve days. You have told me that you consider three years a fitting term for an engagement, and what I would propose is, that we should be married on the third anniversary of the day when—when the subject was originally mooted. This will be November the thirtieth. Now, have you any objection to be married on that day?"

"Not in the least. November the thirtieth seems to me as good a day as we can possibly fix," said Katharine with a smile; the old feeling that they were two marionette lovers playing their little parts in a marionette comedy coming back upon her in full force.

"Then we may look upon the matter as definitely settled," said Lord Petres, rising. "There could not be a more favourable time than the present for bringing the proposal before Duclos," he added. "The scoundrel has been in a better temper than I ever knew him since he drank the Vichy waters, and, considering the way his relations are robbing me, it is possible he may consent to stay for a year, at least, after my marriage. This I will let you know. To-day is the twelfth. It will probably take a week for Duclos to deliberate. Well by the twenty-first then, I propose that I will let you know his ultimatum."

"And if—*if* it should be unfavourable?" asked Katharine, as Lord Petres raised her hand to his lips.

"Then I shall have exactly eleven months and nine days in which to look out for his successor," he answered, with extreme earnestness. "I believe—indeed Duclos himself says—there is one other artist, an Italian fellow, at present in Vienna, who might suit me, but 'tis doubtful whether a man in his position could enter upon a fresh post at so short a notice—more doubtful still whether I should live long in his hands. Katharine, God bless you! You will forgive me if I cover my head before opening the door?"

When Mrs. Dering came home at six o'clock from her ride, Katharine met her with the welcome intelligence that Lord Petres had been to pay them a visit, and that the wedding day was fixed. "It was very thoughtful of you to write to him, Bella," she said, looking up from the place beside the fire where she had been sitting alone in the twilight. "You see, Lord Petres told me all about it, and I am very glad that I have seen him. It really was time that a term should be fixed to his misery."

"And when is it to be, then?" cried Mrs. Dering, radiant, and throwing her arm round her sister's shoulder.

"On the thirtieth of November, rather more than a year hence," said Katharine quietly. "Lord Petres himself fixed the day."

Mrs. Dering's face of horror and disappointment was a study. "You will play out this game of folly a little too long!" she cried, with more temper than it was her habit to show towards Katharine. "The thirtieth of *next* November! For my sake please never mention this ridiculous date to any one we know. If you don't intend to marry Lord Petres, Kate, and what has changed you so utterly of late I refrain even from guessing, it would be better for yourself to say so openly."

"Very likely it would," answered Katharine, with perfect humility; "indeed, I have been saying the same thing to myself for the last hour, ever since he went away. But there, Arabella, there is the sin of my character. I don't love Lord Petres, yet when he offered to set me free just now, I felt that it would be pain greater than I could bear to give him up."

"He—offered—to set you—free!" exclaimed Mrs. Dering, repeating the words with a mechanical, frozen sort of horror.

"Yes, and if I had been true to him or to myself I would have taken the offer—honestly, generously as he made it!" said Katharine, clasping her hands together in a sort of passion. "But I couldn't. I couldn't bear to lose him. I've never been able to give up any one just at the moment when it would be right and honourable to do so. I am like a miser, wanting to have all, but whose own barren heart can give nothing." She bowed her face down, and gazed with vacant tired expression into the fire.

"The real truth is, my dear Kate, that you want tone. Dr. Goodriche says so. Go and lie down now for half an hour—we have people coming to dinner, remember—and I will bring you a glass of sherry. You know what Dr. Goodriche said—"

"—About my taking a glass of sherry whenever I felt out of spirits!" interrupted Katharine. "I wonder how many dozen bottles I should drink a week if I followed his advice? What nonsense doctors are forced to talk sometimes! We might just as well have called in a carpenter because the piano was out of tune as have consulted poor Dr. Goodriche about me."

"And what is the matter with you, then?" said Mrs. Dering, with a desperate feeling that it might be as well to know as to guess the

worst. "It would do you good to speak, Kate. I'm a great many years older than you, and I have learnt that there is a remedy for nearly every ill under the sun."

"I am out of tune!" said Katharine, wearily. "Everything (except Bell and Flossy's voices) is a discord to me. I wake every morning, and know that there's a world full of love and a world full of pain and tears around me, and that I am a puppet in the middle of it all. If I died to-morrow where would be the loss? 'Katharine Fane is dead,' some one would say. 'Well, well, her good looks had begun to fade, poor thing!' And some one else perhaps, 'Ah, she was a woman who lived for her own vanity alone—a woman who never knew the meaning of the word love.' And by to-morrow he would have forgotten me."

"Who would have forgotten you, child?"

"Who? . . . Why, my imaginary mourner, of course!" cried Katharine, lifting up her face with a laugh. "My dear Bella, to think that you and I, of all people living, should surprise ourselves talking sentiment! I've been a little out of spirits, a little bored of late, and what I really do need is—what all spiritless, bored young women need, plenty of fresh air, and good, hard out-of-door exercise. Do men, when they happen to get hipped, want tonics, and sal volatile, and pity from their friends?" went on Katharine. "Of course not; because they don't sit over the fire, and think over their own mental symptoms; neither will I. You and the General have been very kind to me, but I believe hunting twice a week, and walking with papa through the turnip-fields on the remaining four, will be a better tonic for me than all Dr. Goodriche's skill and sherry. Don't think me ungrateful, Bella, but, if you please, I'll go back to Clithero to-morrow."

There was more colour on Katharine's face, more animation in her eyes that evening than there had been for weeks past.

"The fact is, Lord Petres was here to-day," Mrs. Dering whispers to her friends. "He came all the way from Paris, poor fellow, to pay us a morning visit, and I think—well I *think* I may say that the time for my dear Kate's marriage is definitely fixed at last."

CHAPTER XXX.

MRS. LAWRENCE AT HOME.

ONE of the monotonous afternoons, which were Mrs. Lawrence's daily portion, had set in ; Steven away at his work ; the kitchen clock sending its heavy tick-tack, tick-tack, through the silent house, when Barbara threw open the parlour-door, her eyes cast up to the ceiling, an air of stolid protestation written upon her whole face, as the old servant's manner was when ushering in any of "Mrs. Steven's" morning callers.

Steven's proposed amendment of having a girl from the village to wait upon his wife had been rejected by old Barbara with mingled scorn and ridicule. As long as she lived in Ashcot there should be neither girl nor woman wasting and breaking about her kitchen. She had done the housework and the washing, the baking and the boiling when there were five souls ("and four out of them *full-grown*," said Barbara, with incidental irony) to wait upon. If a train of servants was wanted to serve Steven and his wife now, the master could suit himself when he chose. And not only did Barbara refuse foreign help—foreign customs, "the common decencies of life," according to Dot, neither anger nor softness on the part of her new mistress would bring her to accept. "You must put down your sleeves, and tie on another apron always, will you remember ?" Mrs. Lawrence had said when, on the great occasion of Lady Havestock's visit, Barbara, busy with her bread, had unceremoniously walked in before her ladyship, her cotton sleeves pinned up above her elbows, her clean strong old arms thick in flour. "Open the door wide, not with a push, as you always do, and say the visitor's name distinctly and respectfully." Of all which undeniably good advice Barbara had taken precisely as much notice as of the first Napoleonic order about raised pies and fires in October. In former days when visitors called upon Steven's grandmother, or later on, upon the first Mrs. Steven, no such fal-lals as announcing names were wanted. The mistress was sure to be busy in her kitchen or

dairy, and, if the visitors were of sufficient importance to be shown into the unoccupied parlour, would go in there herself—after a lapse of five or ten minutes' dressing to receive them. Barbara had no notion of calling out folks' names, as if they were being asked in the parish church, to suit Mrs. Steven's foreign fancies. If they knew each other already, where was the good of it? If they didn't know each other, what did they come for? This kind of philosophy was so unanswerable that Dot, in despair, had ceased to argue further. Sullenly she began to acknowledge that there were a great many things she would have to accept simply under the guise in which Barbara chose to present them to her—visitors among the rest. As long as she lived she would probably never see morning callers ushered into her presence otherwise than by the push of a parlour-door; an old farm servant, her arms thick in flour or other discreditable compound, marching in, with tight lips, and a face set and hard as fate, straight before them.

On the present occasion Dora had expected to see no one more interesting than homely Mrs. Lyte, or perhaps the doctor's wife, who had not yet paid her wedding visit; and at sight of Katharine she almost jumped up in the air with joy. Here, at last, was a human creature in a well-cut skirt and jacket, with the last shape of hat on its head; a human creature fresh from the land of millinery and of the living.

"Kate—dear Kate! I didn't expect you for a fortnight. How well you look—no you don't, you are thin and pale, but how well your dress suits you! Silk serge, isn't it? You may shut the door, if you please;" this to Barbara, who with coldly curious eyes, had stood to watch the cousin's embrace. "Horrid old creature, did she think we wanted her to stop and hear all we've got to say? Oh, Kate, my dear, if you knew what I have to go through with that woman; until I came I do believe Steven and she dined together in the kitchen—take off your hat . . . it's pretty, but not in the least like what they wear in Paris. When did you come? How do I look? Do you like the new way I do my hair?"

"It changes you a good deal," said Katharine, with a slight tremble in her voice. "But I suppose people ought to look changed

after they are married. I dare say it would have startled me more to find you looking like Dora Fane still."

Dora gave a profound sigh. "I don't feel like Dora Fane, I'm sure," she said, with a shake of the head. "Sit here, Kate. I can't call it an easy chair, but alas! it is the easiest the house possesses. Is Brighton full? Is it true the English are beginning to take to large bonnets again! If they are, they make a fatal mistake. Pieffort, herself, told me nothing larger than that," Dot held up her own diminutive hand, "will be worn this winter. But *is* it true?"

The subject of dress lasted at least a quarter of an hour; the bride insisting upon comparing notes, item by item, as to the respective fashions of Brighton and Paris, and this quarter of an hour gave Katharine time to shake off the first repugnance—I will make the confession for her boldly!--that she had felt on seeing Dora in Steven's house as Steven's wife.

"I was tired of Brighton," she said, when the subjects of silks and serges exhausted, Dora at last began to question her about herself and the cause of her own pale cheeks. "The driving and walking on the cliff, the dressing and parading, and never being able to get away from people, from morning till night, is, to my mind, just the most monotonous life any man or woman could live. There is a hundred times more real excitement in the country than in town, if one knows where to look for it."

"If one does!" said Dot. "Kate, my dear, will you be kind enough to look round this room, and tell me the possible excitement to be derived from a life like mine? You hear that sound? tack, tack, tack, like some one driving nails into a coffin, well, that is the kitchen-clock, and that, with the sea moaning and roaring, or the rain pattering on the window, is what I have to listen to from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night. Now look through the window. I declare," cried Dot, "Aunt Arabella was right! If I had gone into another county it would have been something—a change, at least. Here, there's no change at all, except that I look across from Ashcot to the Dene, instead of from the Dene to Ashcot. Excitement! I should like you to spend a week *precisely* in my place, and see if you would ever talk about *excitement* in the country again."

"I never could spend a week precisely in your place," said Katharine, a sudden flush of colour spreading over her pale face. "If I lived—lived on a farm like this, I know that I could make myself happy, because I would spend the whole of my life out of doors. When I am married," went on Katharine, resolutely, "I mean, if I have any influence at all with Lord Petres, to be as much at Eccleston, and as little in London, as possible."

"And drive, and ride, and play at model farming, and superintend the restoration of your old chapel, and convert the poor, and keep a French cook, and have a house constantly full of people, when you don't go away to London or Paris? Ah! I should like that kind of country life, extremely myself. But Lord Petres and Steven possess, you must remember, rather different incomes."

"I don't think money need make much difference in one's real enjoyment of life," said Katharine, "above all, of country life. But from what you tell me, you never stir out of doors, Dot. You condemn yourself to be miserable! Why don't you ride? Uncle Frank says that Mr. Law . . . your husband," she brought the word out with an effort, "has two of the best horses in the neighbourhood. Try to hunt a bit this winter, or ride at least to see the meets, and if you are not strong enough to get about the farm on foot, buy a shooting-pony to carry you."

"Not I," said Dot. "I hate ponies—besides, what do I want to see on the farm? and I haven't the courage to hunt, even if it would divert me, which it would not. I have no spirits left, that's the truth. I don't believe the place agrees with me. Look at the paper above your head—mildew! and my bedroom is mildewed, and the whole house is mildewed! I've been hoarse ever since the day I came home." And Dot coughed dismally.

"And how did Paris amuse you?" asked Katharine with a genuine feeling of pity—for Steven—rising in her heart. "I hoped from your letters, you were perfectly contented there."

"Paris," answered Dot, "was, as Paris always must be to me, delightful, even though I saw it under disadvantages. There's no doubt about it, Kate, Englishmen (and Steven, in spite of all his travels, is an Englishman, heart and soul) don't know how to enjoy Paris a bit."

"Don't they, indeed?" said Katharine shortly.

"Not a bit! Just figure to yourself the first day or two we spent there!" Dot's face began to grow animated. "We went, of course, to some great expensive hotel, Rue de Rivoli, recommended by Bradshaw. Solemn dinner, surrounded by silent English people at six, breakfast by ourselves, at a huge table, with a hundred and fifty empty cups and saucers ranged round it in the morning, then off arm in arm, to see pictures and churches, as set forth by Galignani, and back again to solemn dinner and silent English people at six. *Dieu des dieux!*" cried Dot, falling back unconsciously upon one of the familiar profanities of her childhood, "what a Paris! A couple of dull rooms, looking into a court yard, a dull table d'hôte dinner, and sight-seeing every day, tête-à-tête with poor Steven! Well the third day was Sunday, and after a good deal of trouble I got him off to the Bois. It was a bright day, and there were bands playing everywhere and numbers of toilettes to be seen. My own was pretty, Kate, that pale grey silk—you remember—corded, and trimmed with groseille, white bonnet, with little groseille feather. I saw that I was regarded as I walked and felt happy—felt in Paris for the first time! I told him so, speaking cheerfully, I suppose, as I felt. 'Dora,' said he, 'in the middle of the prairies or of the forest I never felt so utterly alone as I do at this moment.' Did you ever hear such an answer? Was it chilling, say, at the first moment since our marriage that I had had a distraction?"

I believe I can understand the feeling," said Katharine; but she looked straight into the fire, not at Dora. "Among the crowds of people on the Brighton cliff, I believe I have often thought the same thing myself."

"Well," said Dora, "I, for my part, am very commonplace and matter-of-fact. When I am alone I feel lonely, and when I am in a crowd—yes, without a soul to speak to—I feel I have a society. Don't think in all this, Kate, that I am saying one word against my dear Steven. He is an excellent creature, good and kind to me as he can be, only—about sixty or seventy years behind the rest of the world! Now I asked him once to take me to Mabilly (and all the world knows it is en règle to go there incognito, and with one's

husband), and, unlike Uncle Frank of old, he consented, not in reality knowing any difference between Mabelle and the Morgue. Well we had scarcely entered, were just beginning to look on at the first steps of a quadrille, when he turned with a face of horror, and bore me off like a whirlwind out of the place. 'My poor little Dora! forgive me for taking you there,' he said; 'I took you, as you wished to go, in ignorance.' And he continued to talk about his own stupidity, and to ask my forgiveness, till I was sick to death of the very name of Mabelle."

"And I like him—I admire him for it!" said Katharine, looking up, with her cheeks aflush. "I don't know what sort of place Mabelle is, but I admire Steven for these old-fashioned, simple ideas he has about what women ought or ought not to do. If a man of the world held them, one might think they savoured of hypocrisy or affectation: from him they are real. Try to understand him, Dot," went on poor Katharine, warming; "try to appreciate the really noble parts of his character. He showed his . . . his love for you in this very care, this very delicacy, as to where he took you."

For a minute or two Dot looked thoughtful. "Kate," she said, at last, "you call Steven 'simple'; so, as regards his knowledge of the world, do I; and yet, will you believe me when I say that I don't understand his character one bit? I think sometimes of all the men I have known—men even like George Gordon, whom I detest, or Lord Petres, who has never a word to say to me—and I feel that if I had married any one of them I should have had more in common with my husband—have understood him better than I do Steven. Now can you understand what I mean when I say that I never for one hour together feel sure of him?"

"I cannot, indeed," answered Katharine. "I should have said Steven Lawrence was a man of whom one might feel surer than of any other."

"Well, I don't," said Dot, "and, what is more, I doubt if I ever shall. From the hour of our marriage he has been perfectly kind to me in his forced, absent way (a dozen times a day, at first he used to call me 'Miss Dora!'). He hardly ever left my side in Paris. In every way that he could, he used to try to please me. All this

felt fully ; and yet often—often, when he has been standing looking out at the window of the hotel, and I have watched his moody face, I have thought if he was *once* to break away, he was a man to go and lose every shilling he possessed at play, or get into a quarrel and kill some one—in short, commit any act of folly or desperation you like. You will call it a silly fancy ; but if I was to wake some fine morning now, and find that he had gone straight back to America, and left me and the farm for ever, I should not be surprised. A feeling I can't give a reason for," cried Dot, "tells me his life isn't enough for him ; that Ashcot, though he's never idle for a moment, suits him as little as it does me, and that his perfect good temper, when I complain about Barbara, or anything, arises less from contentment than from half sullen, half-indifferent patience. In short, I don't understand him. We live under one small roof, but in different worlds. Voilà !"

The subject was dismissed, and Dot got out her embroidery, and talked of the elaborate capes and dresses she meant to work, trusting Providence might send her the chance to wear them next summer ; and of Barbara's shortcomings ; and the horrors of Shiloh ; and the visitors who had called and who had not called—the interests, such as they were, of her small world. And on and on as she talked one image was ever present to Katharine—the image that Dot, in her unconsciousness, had made so clear of Steven's paralyzed life—the moody-faced man turning round from weary gazing through the hotel window to call his wife "Miss Dora ;" the man with every strong capacity for good or for evil, for keenest pleasure or keenest pain, forcing himself by work into a kind of lethargic patience ; kind to the poor unsympathetic little creature who had married him, yet under one small roof, each living in their own widely-separated world ! Katharine saw it all—all the first act in this mockery of a marriage, which her vanity, her cowardice, had been the means of bringing about.

At five o'clock, to a moment, Barbara entered with the tea-things. "I did not ring," said Dot, looking up from the table, all strewn over and heaped up with embroidery and laces.

Barbara stood erect and silent—a rational being performing her

duty of bringing in the master's tea, but having no concern whatever with these two fine wax-dolls and their tableful of gewgaws and vanities. As she stood so, and while Dot pettishly found herself constrained with her own hands to make room for the tea-tray, Katharine, from her corner by the fireside, watched the old servant's face. It was a fine strong face, she thought. In spite of its present acid expression there was plenty of good human kindness about the firm old mouth and keen, deep-set grey eyes. "If I had been Dot, I would have made Barbara like me in three days," she thought. "If—ah, if Dot loved Steven, this woman could not keep from liking her for his sake!" And just then Barbara turned, and fastened on her a look so piercing, so bitter-full of contempt, of passionate resentment—that Katharine's eyes sank abashed to the floor. In that moment it seemed to her that another human soul beside her own knew her secret and despised her.

Tea at Ashcot was not a flimsy pretence, like the five o'clock tea of London ladies, but a meal; one of the four good hearty wholesome meals of the day. "We dine at other people's breakfast hour," said Dot, when Barbara had left the room, as if to apologize for the substantial plate of bread-and-butter, the seed-cake, the preserves, which the old servant had set out; "and as the solemnity they call supper does not occur till half-past nine, one really wants something now, and dear Steven *has* such an appetite!"

As Mrs. Lawrence spoke, a step—the lithe quick step Katharine knew so well—sounded on the gravel path outside the window. A minute later Dot ran forward, as the parlour-door opened, and Steven, who coming in from the dusk to candle-light could discern no object in the room, took his wife in his arms and kissed her.

"My dear Steven!" cried Dot, half-pretending to push him away, "don't you see we have a visitor? Here's Katharine come back."

Miss Fane rose from her chair, and came forward smiling. The sight of that little affectionate demonstration had furnished her for the moment, she felt, with abundant self-possession. "How do you do, Steven?—you will let me call you by your name now? you did not expect to see me sitting by your fireside, did you?"

She held out her hand to him, chill as it had been at the instant

they said good-bye on his marriage day ; and Steven held it—coldly at first ; then, as his eyes grew accustomed to her face, with sudden, eager clasp in his. “ Why, you have been ill ! ” he said, as unconscious of Dora’s presence as if she had belonged to another planet. “ You are ill now—and I never heard of it.”

There was such deep, such genuine concern in his voice as he said this, that even Dot, the least sensitive, the least jealous of wives, could not help noticing it. “ That is what I call a really cheerful greeting ! ” she cried. “ Steven never takes a roundabout road in anything, I must tell you, Kate. If he thinks you look ill, he says so as you perceive.”

“ Steven is quite right,” said Katharine, drawing back her hand and coming over to Mrs. Lawrence’s side. “ And, unless I mistake, Dot, you told me the same thing. I *am* ill—I mean I have been ill—I mean I don’t think Brighton agreed with me.”

Steven turned round sharply ; walked away, his hands thrust into his pockets, to the window, and stood there gazing out, without speaking a word, at the darkness.

“ That is his way,” whispered Dot, getting on tip-toes to reach Katharine’s ear. “ Just as I told you he used to stand and stare out into the court-yard in Paris. Steven, my dear ; ” after a minute or two ; “ when you have quite done looking at nothing, perhaps you will be good enough to come to tea ; Kate and I are waiting for you patiently.”

He came obediently, and placed himself at his wife’s side ; Katharine at the other side of the table ; and then Dot, who seemed in her old high spirits this evening, began to pour out tea and talk for everybody.

“ It was so good of you to come to us the first day of your return, Kate. Aunt Arabella will be jealous. Of course, you don’t mean to return till late ? ”

Katharine answered that she must be home at a little past six. Mr. Hilliard was to call for her at half-past five at latest, and she was afraid it was that already. “ I am sure I hope papa won’t forget all about me,” she added. “ Poor mamma will never forgive my *being absent* from dinner to-day.”

"Oh, if Uncle Frank doesn't come, and you really must go, Steven will walk with you," said Dot. "Won't you, Steven, when tea is over?"

"No, indeed," cried Katharine, before he could answer. "I would not think of taking Mr. Law—of taking Steven out. If papa does not come I shall just wait patiently till they send for me. You need not be in such a hurry to get rid of me, Dot."

She laughed a little as she said this; and Steven looked steadily at her once more. The laugh, that had once been so pleasant to listen to in its rippling, girlish frankness, seemed to have lost more of its youth than even her face had lost. What was amiss with her?

Was her engagement going wrong? Had she failed in subjugating a sufficient number of slaves of late? or—but he hated himself for the thought—was she acting a part with him still?

"If his spirit has suffered it has not affected him much outwardly!" thought Katharine, taking a glance at Steven's bronzed, healthy face, then at the great slice of brown bread and marmalade on his plate. "It's easy enough in poetry or novels to depict blighted heroes of six feet one, but when one comes to see them near, the picture loses its pathos!"

With so much justice do men and women judge each other in the supreme moments of their lives.

The conversation flagged somewhat at first, not because Dot was at a loss for words, but because Katharine shrank in Steven's presence from discussing satin-stitch and fashions still. At length it came round to Brighton, and Dora began to ask about the people who were spending the season there. Katharine run through a string of names, glad to have found so thoroughly neutral a subject; finally, forgetting what she was about, spoke of Mr. Clarendon Whyte. In a moment Dot's colour changed. "Was—was his wife with him?" she asked, in a low voice, and becoming intently occupied with her tea-cup.

"His wife? oh, that was all a false report," said Katharine. "Ara-bella told us what she had heard, but there was not, it seems, a word of real truth in it. At all events, Mr. Clarendon Whyte seems to me just as far from being married, or thinking of any one but himself, as ever."

A curious look came across Dora Lawrence's face. "And did you, or rather did Mrs. Dering, see as much of Mr. Whyte as you used in town?" she asked.

"I believe he used to come to the house a good deal," answered Katharine; "but I saw very little of him. You know of old how much Mr. Whyte and I cared for each other."

"He is still *laquais de place*, in short, Kate!"

"Still *laquais de place*," said Katharine. "With this difference, that the General now accepts his attentions. It is a great sight to see poor Mr. Whyte's face when he is left alone with General Dering after dinner."

"If the wine is good, Clarendon Whyte would be contented," remarked Dot, with a little curl of the lip. "The labourer is worthy of his hire. Steven, dearest, cut me a slice of bread-and-butter."

Much to Katharine's relief, her stepfather made his appearance shortly after six o'clock. Mr. Hilliard, who never saw a yard farther in the spirit than his eyes showed him materially, came into the parlour, his kind face beaming with smiles. Just at first, when Dora and her husband returned home, he had, it must be confessed, not felt quite sure as to the degree of intimacy that ought to exist between the inmates of Ashcot and of the Dene. Classes were classes; and whatever one's personal feelings might be, there *were* distinctions it was a duty to keep up. But this small leaven of traditional dignity (due in the first instance to his wife's suggestions, rather than to impulse of his own) had vanished before the daily-increasing liking which the honest-hearted little Squire was beginning to feel for Steven. The lad, whatever his birth, had the feelings of a gentleman; was making Dot a good husband, looking after his farm as he ought, draining his clay-lands on his, the Squire's, own system; and now, here was Katharine capital friends with them both! What should Mr. Hilliard know of the vain repentance, the vain passion, the bitter discontent underlying the outward varnish of this pleasant little picture of domestic peaceful happiness?

"We shall see more of you now, Mrs. Dora, I hope," he said, patting Mrs. Lawrence's small shoulder as they were leaving. "Mind, you must consider the Dene just as much your home as ever; and you too,

Lawrence. Come to us as you used in the days when you and Dot had not begun to quarrel."

Katharine turned away her head. Dora, not in the slightest degree discountenanced, began to laugh. "We never quarrel now, do we, Steven? and we shall always, always be glad to come to the Dene, Uncle Frank. I haven't seen Aunt Arabella for an age."

"Well, then, come and see her to-morrow; and by the bye, Lawrence," added the Squire, turning to Steven, "if you have nothing particular to do, I wish you would run over in the morning and try this new Irish horse of mine. Kate is bent on riding him to the meet next Wednesday, and I should be glad to see you put him at a fence or two first. You can come over any time of the day you like, Dora, my dear, and stop to dinner, both of you."

Dot accepted without giving Steven time to speak; and almost before Mr. Hilliard and Katharine had left the house was busying herself in thinking over her apparel for the next day. The audience would be a limited one; still, dining at the Dene was "going out" now; and Dora had long ago decided that if she waited for suitable occasions on which to wear her different Parisian clothes she would lie (in the last unalterable toilette) in Clithero churchyard before most of them were worn at all.

"And does not Kate look ill, Steven?" she cried, running out to her husband as he stood, lighting his pipe, in the porch. "I never thought she would lose her looks so soon. Her wedding-day is fixed at last, you know, and Katharine says she is determined to be married in a bonnet, and have no party at all. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

Steven was silent; his wife's remarks seldom seemed to him to require any specific answer; besides, he really was occupied at this moment in getting his meerschaum to light; a much graver interest, to a man of sense, than hearing about young ladies' love-affairs or wedding-dresses.

"It seems quite good to have Kate back," went on Dot. "There will be some one to speak to, some one to take pity on us a little of an evening now. Oh dear, out again!" This as Steven went inside the passage, and took up his hat. "Now what *can* there be for you to do at this time of night!"

"There are the horses to look to, and the cows to fodder," Steven answered. "Both the lads have got a holiday to-night."

"As usual," said his wife; "I believe you give them holidays so often simply that you may have more work to do yourself! How long will you be, then?" Mrs. Lawrence felt that it would be better to chatter, even to a silent husband, than be left alone with her own reflections, her own restless dissatisfied heart to-night.

"I shall be back in half an hour, my love," said Steven, stooping and pressing his lips on her forehead with the cold gentleness which already had become a habit (in love nothing is habitual) to him. "Just as long as it will take me to finish my pipe."

Dora looked after her husband as far as she could discern his figure through the darkness, and remarked that when he had gone about a dozen yards from the house he turned away towards the sea-walk, not the stables. From the parlour-window, long afterwards, she could see the red glow of Steven's pipe moving to and fro, to and fro—"like the unquiet ghost that he is!" thought Dot—along the same twenty or thirty paces of the path. And an expression the reverse of tender rose into Mrs. Lawrence's eyes as she stood and watched there.

"Dot and her husband seem to get on together admirably," said Mr. Hilliard, as he was trotting home in excellent spirits, and with an excellent appetite for his dinner, at Katharine's side. "Admirably. You may take some credit to yourself for your success in match-making, after all, Kate!"



CHAPTER XXXI.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

"LOVE, they say, cannot exist without jealousy. Can jealousy exist I wonder, without love?" This Dora Lawrence asked herself one drizzling December evening as she stood by the parlour window of Ashcot playing dreary tunes, her usual occupation, on the glass, and looking out across the wet leafless garden for Steven's return from hunting.

Can jealousy exist without love ? Dora's was not a mind given in a general way to the solution of nice psychological difficulties, but this question was one which during the past fortnight—the fortnight that had elapsed since Katharine's return—she had put to herself pretty frequently. "The fact is, I suppose, there are different sorts of jealousy," she went on in her thoughts, after crossing to stir the fire and look at herself in the unflattering dull old glass over the mantel-shelf ; then returning more drearily than before to her watch beside the window ; "and what I feel is a remote variety, not following the ordinary laws of the species. A woman who was jealous in the good orthodox fashion would be jealous under any circumstances. I should not. If I had amusements, if I had friends, I should be grateful to any one who would keep Steven away five or six hours a day, and then send him back in a better temper in the evening ! I'm jealous—if it is jealousy—just because I hate other people to be amused and me not. La—la ! am I bad ?—am I wicked at heart ? Is it much to want my little bit of distraction, my little bit of pleasure, when all the rest of the world are amusing themselves without me ?" And as Dot leaned her head against the window, heavy tears—for she was not *en toilette*, had no complexion this afternoon—began to roll slowly down her miserable face.

Five o'clock came, but no Steven ; and about ten minutes after the usual time old Barbara, unbidden, brought in candles and tea. Dot was seated by the fire now ; her little figure curled up in the solitary armchair the room possessed—a huge structure, affording no available rest either for the back or head—with her face buried down in her hands. She started up, white as a ghost, and with her dark eyes looking darker and bigger than usual, at the old servant's entrance. "There's no good bringing tea yet. Your master is out. You know very well I wouldn't begin without him."

Barbara set down the candles and the tea-tray, stood for a minute erect and silent, then cleared her throat twice, thrice, and came over the room to Dora's side. "My dear," she said, "don't 'ee fret ! Steven didn't ought to leave you as he does, and I mean to tell him so. I've baked you some hot cakes such as you like, and done you a bit of ham on the grill, and do'ee set up and make a good tea. There

was never a man yet brought home quicker by his wife's keeping an empty stomach and worrying after him."

If the kitchen clock had suddenly broken out into words of human sympathy Dot could scarcely have been more taken aback than by the sound of Barbara's voice speaking to *her* in kindness. What should she know of that old heart's passionate love and passionate jealousy? How guess that in pitying her, Steven's neglected wife, Barbara was but joining issue against the woman whom she looked upon as the common enemy of both—Katharine Fane?

"I am sure I don't feel as if I could eat," she cried with a gulp; but at that moment the odours of hot cakes and broiled ham came in from the kitchen, and she got down out of her chair. "This damp weather makes me hoarser than ever, and—and my head aches. I don't think I shall ever know what it is to feel well again!"

She did in truth look desperately ill at this moment, as many women whose beauty depends upon art do when art chances to be laid aside. Barbara looked at her long and steadily. "Mrs. Steven," said she, "when I first heard of Steven's marrying—yes, and when I first seen you here, and no more suited to farm ways than I should be to sit up on a sofy alongside the Squire's lady—my heart was set——"

"—Set against me!" cried Dora, as she hesitated. "I am sure you needn't mind speaking the truth. I am getting to see pretty well how much everybody at Ashcot cares for me!"

"Well, I knew that my poor boy had done a foolish thing by marrying out of his class and out of his religion—there's the truth—and I showed it——"

"—You did!" cried Dora.

"And now—now, Mrs. Steven," went on Barbara, with a quiver of the lip, "I say wherever the fault was before marriage, the fault of your unhappiness as a wife will lie at Steven's door! What business has he riding here and there, to hounds one day, coursing the next—at the side of those who should blush to see him there—and you, not married two months, alone, fretting by yourself? In our class of life we've no soft words for those who come between man and wife; but the gentry's ways—the gentry's ways," said Barbara

with rising passion, "are different to ours in most things, as the Lawrences have found to their cost before this !"

Mrs. Lawrence bit her lip, and looked steadily down at the faded pattern of the carpet. The surface comedy, not the hidden pathos of every situation of human life, was always what really impressed Dot vividly ; and she had all the trouble in the world not to laugh at this moment. She, Dora Fane, listening to virtuous homilies from old Barbara ! Dora Fane pitied as a wife whose heart was breaking over a faithless husband's neglect ! Mechanically Mrs. Lawrence passed her fingers down over her pocket to make sure that two letters which had reached her by the morning's post were lying safe there.

"I couldn't hear a word against Steven, and I don't know who the 'other person' is you speak of. He rode to the meet with the Squire and Miss Fane to-day. Of course, if I was strong, I would like to ride to, but I'm not strong, and—and I could never wish Steven to be in better company than my Uncle Frank and my dear Cousin Katharine."

She said this with as pretty an air of self-sacrifice as can be imagined, and Barbara's stern heart softened more and more. "You'll never be strong," she said, "as long as you mope in-doors by yourself, and don't breathe the air from one week's end to another ; and so I'll tell Steven to-night. Why don't he set up a pony-shay, and drive you about a bit, as his Uncle Joshua used *his* wife ?" cried Barbara, forgetting, probably, the unending source of strife which that very "pony-shay" had been between herself and Mrs. Joshua.

"Oh, I'm sure I don't want any fresh expense incurred for me," said Dot, modestly. "Perhaps if we had a pony carriage it would bore Steven to have to drive me in it. What would do me good I think, and not cost much," she gave a quick look at Barbara's face, "would be a little change—that is, I mean if Steven thought it right to leave the farm."

"It would be hard to say what Steven does think right now," said Barbara, with a solemn shake of the head, as she walked off out of the parlour. "But he shall hear my mind—he shall hear my mind !" This Dora overheard as the old woman's firm heavy step went down

the passage. "Those whom God hath put together . . ." here the welcome sound of crackling fat told Dora the ham was coming off the fire, and the rest of the quotation was lost—"and not all the gentry in England shall hinder me from telling Steven what I think of him, ay—and of her too."

A minute later the hot scones and ham, with extra good tea and extra thick cream, were set upon the table, and poor Mrs. Lawrence, considering the state of her delicate throat and of her wounded affections, managed to make a really admirable high-tea. "I tried so hard to eat," she said, when Barbara took away the empty plates. "Mr. Lawrence may not be home for hours, and I don't want him to find me more faint and wearied than I can help when he does come."

While these things went on in his household, Steven was riding slowly home through the lanes at Miss Fane's side. I have said that it was a raw December evening. The sky was overcast; the air charged with moisture; the roads were ankle-deep in mud; the bare trees dripping and forlorn. But a raw December evening, like most other things or seasons, takes its colouring mainly from the prism through which human eyes view it. To Dot, alone at the farmhouse window, with her own thoughts (and a new-gotten letter worse than her thoughts) for companionship, no sky had ever been so black, no world so unutterably, hopelessly full of gloom, as the sky and world she looked at to-day. To Steven, after a first-rate run, with the glow of animal health and spirits in his veins, with Katharine's face beside him in the twilight, the world for this short half hour was well-nigh as bright a world again as it had been under the sunshine of June. What had he to do with Miss Fane now? What hope could stir in his heart at being near Lord Petres' future wife—his own waiting for him with poor childish babble, with unsympathetic voice, at the fireside at home? What did Miss Fane feel for him, but pitying toleration as her cousin's husband? What but madness could make him haunt her as he did, mindless of all past misery she had wrought him; rewarded for twenty-four hours by the touch of her friendly hand, the "good morning" of her friendly voice? Well, Steven Lawrence *was* mad: loved Katharine Fane still, you see; there is the answer.

He had to ride back with her to the Dene this evening, for the Squire's horse had fallen lame early in the run, and out of the dozen men who volunteered to see her home Miss Fane, naturally, had chosen her cousin Steven, so she called him, for an escort. Scarcely twenty sentences : none for very certain that would bear recording : passed between them as they rode along. No man living was more profoundly ignorant than Steven of the art of conversation. Unless he spoke the truth—which, while he lived, he must never speak to Katharine Fane—he held his peace. But there is the silence that comes from having nothing to say ; the silence that comes from having too much ; and perhaps this last is as eloquent as any speech we know of. To Katharine, at all events, those rutty lanes, that long expanse of common leading from Stourmouth to Clithero, had never seemed so short as to-night. She had got back much of her bodily strength during the last fortnight, which showed that her own system of tonics was a good one ; that Brighton life, and want of exercise, and thinking of herself and her own troubles, had been mostly to blame for her white cheeks. And as for spirits—well, throughout all this portion of her life, Katharine Fane never gave herself time to think whether her spirits were good or bad. She got up the second that her eyes were open in the morning ; went with a sort of feverish zeal through her usual duties at the school-house and in the parish ; walked, rode, dutifully visited poor little Dot at Ashcot ; saw Steven Lawrence on the kind of terms she would have done had he been her brother ; and when night came was sure of sleep through sheer bodily fatigue. “Are you trying to kill yourself, Kate ?” her mother asked her more than once, when, in spite of rain and wind and early snow, Katharine would appear of a morning in her habit and hat as usual. And, “not myself, mamma,” was Katharine's answer. “I am not trying to kill myself, but a moping laziness which took possession of me awhile since, and which I am determined shall die. Leave me alone, mamma dear. When my enemy is dead and buried I'll stop quietly at home, and do worsted work, and sing songs, and be like other people again.”

Well, to-night the enemy was slain, or so she began to think. The horrible distaste for life which used to overcome her in Brighton was

gone : so much at least was clear. She was living on terms of good-will with Steven, meeting him daily ; wishing, God knows, to see him happy in his home, and to be his friend and Dora's ! And the wintry smell from the purple brown fields had never seemed so fresh to her, or the way home, through the rutty lanes or across Stourmouth Common, so short. Yes—the enemy was slain ! A pure new affection, such as she might have felt if heaven had given her a brother, had replaced the feeling which died—which should have died—on Steven's wedding-day ; and Steven . . . oh, Steven was happy enough : no doubt of that ! Were men like women in their capacity for remembering ? Her imagination had led her astray just at first about his life being “paralyzed.” His farm and his horses and his gun filled Steven's heart, and it was well so. The enemy was slain ; the requiem chanted ; and both had come back to the prosaic well-beaten road of life along which men and women do walk contentedly when the first summer days are passed ; the first roses, with their blossoms and their thorns, plucked and dead.

They rode silently up the avenue to the Dene, and into the stable-yard. The head groom was away ; only one of the stable lads and Katharine's great setter pup came out in the darkness to meet them : and for the first time it fell to Steven to help Miss Fane to dismount.

“Oh, thanks ; I can jump down very well by myself,” cried Katharine, as he came up to her side. “I am quite accustomed to mount and dismount alone.” Saying this, she disengaged her foot from the stirrup, gathered her habit together in her hand, then, either from the horse swerving, or from the puppy springing up to greet her, or both, missed her balance, and, but for Steven, would have fallen heavily to the ground.

He caught her ; he held her up in his arms—one second ; not longer than a groom would have held his mistress if he had saved her from falling. But in that second Katharine Fane knew that the enemy who was slain, over whose grave the requiem was chanted, had come back to life.

With a hurried “Good-night !” a hurried shake of the hand, she

ran past him into the house ; and Steven, after lingering to see a light shine from an upper window that he knew, rode away home to Ashcot, and to his wife.

Old Barbara met him at the kitchen door. He was splashed from head to foot ; his handsome face glowed with health, and something more than health ; and he was whistling. "Yes," thought Barbara, "a man leading such a life as his *whistling* !" The old woman's face was solemn as a churchyard slab. She raised up a candle, and surveyed him up and down with cold scrutiny. "You are here at last, then," she said.

"Yes," said Steven, with perfect good humour. "I am here—not killed this time, you see, Barbara."

Barbara coughed drily. "I'm never afeard but you'll take care of yourself, Steven—of yourself and of your own pleasures ! If you looked a little after others, too, you'd do well, I'm thinking. Here's Mrs. Steven been fretting herself till she's sick, and no wonder. Your wife *is* sick, Steven—there's the long and short of it—and it's ill of you to be riding and gallanting after other folks, and her sick at home, and so I tell you."

"Riding—gallanting after other folks?" cried Steven, the blood rushing hotly to his face. "What, in God's name, are you talking about ? I didn't expect such nonsense from you, Barbara ! Must a man leave off in the midst of a long run because he happens to have left a wife at home, or what ?"

"A man should remember, whether he's on horseback or afoot, that he *has* a wife at home," said Barbara, undaunted. "You chose her, and you did wed her, Steven ; and I say it's no man's part to neglect her now."

Just at this juncture the parlour door opened, and "Steven, Steven ! have you come at last ?" sounded faintly, in Dot's voice, attuned to that plaintive minor, the like of which the hearts of most married men have had occasion to respond to in their lives.

With his conscience pricking him horribly, Steven went forward to meet her. "I'm really not fit to come near you, my love," he cried ; "I'm mud all over ; the country was never in such a state ; and—and I hope, Dora, you have not waited tea for me. I'll just run and change my clothes, and——"

"Oh dear, not for my sake!" cried Dora, going back to the fire. "It's *my* bedtime. I shan't be up ten minutes longer. After sitting alone all day long, I'm sure one has not heart to care whether people's clothes are covered with mud or not."

She sat down, very upright indeed, in the tower of an armchair, and stared disconsolately at the fire. Steven pushed to the door, shutting out the distant thunders of Barbara's voice, and came across the room to his wife's side. "Dora," he said, "after looking down at her white face for a minute or two, "I'm sorry I left you alone so long. It won't happen again. It was the best run we have had this season, and the Squire's horse unfortunately fell lame, and I had to take your cousin back to the Dene. If it hadn't been for that, I should have been here an hour ago or more."

Dot smiled: the most unpleasant smile, Steven thought, that he had ever seen on her face. "What a bore for you! How you must have anathematized Uncle Frank and his horse in your hearts, both of you. Steven," perfectly abruptly this, "I wonder how you would like it—I wonder what you would say—if I went on as you do?"

Steven did not answer. The suddenness of the attack left him, as his wife intended it should do, no time to collect his thoughts.

"I know very well that the world makes one rule for men and another for women," went on Dot; "but you don't belong, or pretend not to belong, to the world; and I ask you, on your conscience, what you would think if any man was to run after me—spend the same number of hours with me daily as you do with Katharine? Dear Kate is perfectly blameless," cried Mrs. Lawrence, quickly; warned, perhaps, by some rising expression round the corners of Steven's lips. "She likes riding and hunting, and naturally finds you a pleasanter companion than Uncle Frank. Kate is my best friend, and I hate myself for feeling a little jea—jealous!" Dot hid away her face; "but I can't help it—and I know you never loved me! and I've been alone," holding out her hand to him, "eight hours and twenty minutes. Oh, Steven, Steven!"

The big manly heart of Steven Lawrence was overcome in an instant. He never thought of defending himself: he felt, with

shame and contrition, that he was guilty: and Dora's skilful generosity in withdrawing blame from Katharine had disarmed him on the one point where he might have found strength.

"I've been selfish to leave you, Dora. My poor foolish little Dora! to think that you should have fretted for me, though! As if—why, my dear, what *can* you have to be jealous of now?"

He knelt down at her side, and Dora put her arms round his neck and kissed him. Barbara, marching sternly in just then with supper for the master, found them so; and was reminded—long afterwards that likeness haunted her—of a certain picture of Samson and Delilah in the family Bible.

As an ally stronger than all others against Katharine Fane, she had joined issue with Steven's wife an hour before; yet had she never liked—never trusted her so little as at this moment. Poor Barbara's ignorant love, you must remember, was that of a mother for her first-born; and such love is apt to be prophetic in its intuitions.



CHAPTER XXXII.

DORA CONQUERS.

"FOR the economy of the plan I undertake to answer," said Dora. "Five hundred francs, twenty pounds a month for an apartment in the Champs Elysées is ludicrously—simply ludicrously—cheap! and living, if one knows what one is about, can be reduced to a mere nothing in Paris."

Dora's husband opened his eyes wide. ✓

"Oh! I know what you mean, Steven," cried Mrs. Lawrence; "we *flung* money away when we were there. I suppose people always do when they are first married. That extravagant English hotel! those preposterous wines! table d'hôte dinner every day! best places at the theatre! Now, if we were living quietly in an apartment, just see the difference! We have our coffee in the morning, a glass of common wine at noon, a frugal dinner at six, and then, as people of our means ought, go to a cheap place at the theatre—if, indeed, we felt ourselves justified in going to theatres at all. I could

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The tone of his voice was jesting, but there was a look about his face that Dot did not like ; just a shadow of 'the look that she had first seen that day when he spoke of Dawes's dishonesty, and of his own Lynch notions respecting the administration of justice.

"You may read anything—everything I possess, Steven, I am sure !" And as she said this Dot moved away nearer to the fire, and the small hand furthest from her husband closed tightly over the letter in her pocket. "'My own—my ever dear Dora' is from our dear old governess, Miss Hayes, who, as it chances, is also in Paris just now."

"She writes like a man, both in handwriting and style," said Steven, laconically. "I didn't know women were ever so affectionate in their way of addressing each other."

"Oh dear, yes ! Listen to Grizelda !" cried Dora, unfolding the second letter with self-possession thoroughly restored, "Grizelda, who has not spoken to me a dozen times in her life, and who, I know *can't* really like me !"

"'My dearest Dora,—It affords me the greatest pleasure possible to be of a little use to you and your husband.' I must confess I wrote to her, Steven. I thought as the Phantom was in Paris, there could be no harm in setting her to find out about prices, whether we went or not.—'Such apartments as you require are very hard—almost impossible—to get, but, by a most singular chance, I believe, I could at this moment put you into exactly what you want. My great friends, the Honourable Mr. and Mrs. Dynevor—' Poor old Grizelda and her honourables !—'are obliged by dear Lord Eastmeath's death to go to Dublin, and are willing to let their apartments for the remainder of the term, two months, at a nominal rent. I have prevailed on them to let the matter stand over till I get your answer ; and in great haste, and with affectionate love to Miss Fane when you see her, and remembrances to Mr. Lawrence,

"'I am, dearest Dora,

"'Your attached friend,

"'GRIZELDA LONG.

"P.S.—the Dynevors ask the ridiculous price of five hundred francs a month ! Entresol, sunny side of the Champs Elysées, everything very small, but large enough for two people, and a *French* servant. Of course, you bring your own plate and linen.—G. L.'

"And now, Steven, cried Dora, "I put it to you honestly, Is the offer tempting or is it not ?"

"It is not at all tempting to me," said Steven, laying down his pipe and looking straight before him into the fire. "We spent six times as much as we ought when we were in Paris the last time, and, as far as I could see, got very poor enjoyment for our money."

Dot made him a little mock reverence, and smiled. "A hundred thanks for the compliment ! You are speaking of our honeymoon, my dear."

"I am speaking of Paris," said Steven, "and I believe if we had gone to any other place on earth, I should have liked it better. If you really want change, you shall have it," he went on. "I'll take you for a week to Ramsgate, anywhere you like, but don't speak of Paris. Paris isn't suited to our means, or to me. Twenty pounds a month may seem ridiculously cheap to your friend, Miss Long. I call it ridiculously dear. At all events, it is a vast deal more than I can afford, or than I mean to pay."

"Then the thing is settled," said Dora, with the corners of her mouth twitching. "As to Ramsgate, I thank you ! I would rather take to my room and remain there all the winter than go to Ramsgate. The thing is settled. I am ill : I believe my left lung is seriously affected. I get thinner, and my cough gets worse every day, and I thought Paris would set me up : and we have an offer, whatever you may say, of extraordinary reasonable lodgings there. Still, if you can't afford it, I say no more. I am not consulted in the housekeeping expenses, therefore you must excuse me for my ignorance of your means. Two hunters in the stable certainly don't *give* one the idea of extreme poverty !"

"I'm obliged to keep horses for the farm," said Steven. "Besides, I ride to sell, as you know. The chestnut is as good as sold to Lord Haverstock at this moment."

"And when the chestnut is gone?"

"I am thinking of buying that grey filly of Mill's, if I find she's up to my weight. He is only asking forty sovereigns for her and—"

"Forty sovereigns!" interrupted Dora; "the exact sum required for two months' hire of my poor little apartment!"

"And before the season was a quarter over I'd engage to sell her again for eighty," said Steven. "You don't understand, Dora. Horse-dealing, in a small way, is part of my business, and for my horses to be seen I must ride them. 'Tis a business," he went on, "that my father and grandfather, and every one belonging to my name, have tried their hand at, and none of us ever made a bad thing of it yet."

"Business!" said Dot, with a flash of her great eyes. "Wonderfully pleasant business, I must say! To go, for *my* health, to Paris, would be very insipid compared to the 'business' of hunting, as well-mounted as any man in Kent, at Katharine Fane's side!"

"Katharine Fane!" cried Steven—I regret to add with an angry expletive closely following—"can't you leave her name alone? What has she got to do with this senseless scheme about going to Paris?"

"Everything," said Dot calmly; all her good temper returning at the sight of Steven's anger. "Or, rather, she has everything to do with the senseless scheme not being carried out. I'm not playing at jealousy, Steven, and you are not playing at admiration of my cousin? When you first offered to marry me, you told me you had loved her as well as a man could love a woman so far above him in rank, that there were things impossible to get over in a day, *et cetera*, but that you would try honestly to give me the first place in your heart; and so I accepted you."

Steven put his hand up wearily across his forehead.

"So I accepted you," went on Dot, "thinking, out of self-respect alone, that you would treat me with consideration when I was your wife—I, who, at least, had never despised, never misled you!"

Here another exclamation, not worthy alas! to be recorded, broke from Steven's lips.

"Ah, it's very well to be violent—very well to use language like

that," said Dora. "I say I am right, and that I have justice on my side. Why, your own servant, little as she likes me, pities me and condemns your goings on, and the way you leave me here alone. However, I'll say no more to you, Steven. I'll tell Kate, who has been good to me always, what I suffer, and ask her to have pity on me."

Steven grasped hold of her wrist with sudden passion. "Do you know what you are talking about?" he exclaimed. "Do you know what you mean when you threaten to expose this absurd discussion to your cousin?"

Dora came a little nearer to her husband again, and looked down, nothing daunted, into his eyes. "My dear," she said, "don't hurt me—my poor little wrists haven't much muscle in them! and just give me a plain, straightforward answer, please, to what I'm going to ask you. *Have* you got over your old dream about Katharine? *Is* it natural that I should like you to be with her, and away from me, every day, and all day long of your life?"

"I—we spoke of this when I came in," said Steven, "and I promised that I would remain at home with you more. You forgave me freely, remember, Dora. I looked upon the story as finished."

"Ah, if it could only be so!" said Dot with a sigh. "But I'm afraid—I'm afraid there are some stories that are never quite finished while we live!" She drew her hand from his, then stole it round his neck again. "I'm no good—I've no place in the world," she sobbed. "Why do I fret at being ill? Why do I want Paris, or any other place, to set me up? I'll stop here alone, dear Steven—here at Ashcot—and never ask for a change, and never, if I can help it, be selfish or jealous about your amusements again!"

She cried—great tears, like a child's, running down her cheeks—for two or three minutes. At last, "How soon is this apartment to be vacant?" asked Steven. His voice was changed: he felt really touched, really conscience-stricken, by her sudden outburst of resignation. "I've been thinking, Dora, that, some way or another, I'll manage for you to have it. Perhaps we might contrive so that I needn't be with you the whole time?"

"Oh, dear, yes!" cried Dot readily. "That is, you know if you were really wanted on the farm."

"And we must do what we can to make up afterwards for the expense. If you think Paris will do you good, my dear, you shall go there, I promise you."

"Dearest Steven! . . . There'll be no expense as regards dress, for, of course, I have got all my wedding things not worn. What will the Ducies say? I'll go and tell Katharine to-morrow before church-time, and then write to Grizelda at once. Oh, I do feel in such spirits!"—the tears were on her cheeks still. "We'll go by Havre—what does sea-sickness matter? Havre is the cheapest route, and I mean to save every shilling that I can. We needn't have a regular servant; a charwoman at fifteen sous a day would be quite enough, with my knowledge of cooking. So lucky Grizelda Long is to be in Paris for the winter, isn't it?"

"Very lucky," said Steven, absently; "and your other friend, Miss Hayes, too."

"Well, as to Miss Hayes," said Dot, a good deal of colour coming into her face again at the mention of her old friend's name, "I don't really care much about her; indeed, she will most likely have left before we get there. Our friendship is a thing of the past. I shan't want society, you know, Steven. To walk about in the bright air will be enough for me, and to visit the galleries and places of interest with you, dear!"

Steven thought silently of the galleries and places of interest they had wearied through during their honeymoon; and in a few minutes' time Dot (singing and jumping, in spite of her thirty years, like a child who has been promised a holiday) ran upstairs, and he was left alone.

The first great contest, the first real struggle for power was over, he felt, between himself and his wife;—and his wife had conquered. It was well that she had done so! Rigidly taking himself to task as he sits here, still in his splashed hunting-clothes, staring, with moody face, into the fire, Steven feels that he *has* been disloyal to Dora, to the only heart that beats for him, that belong to him in the world. All the free-lance morality, the tawdry Don Juan doctrines of the

school of Mr. Clarendon Whyte are unknown to poor ill-educated Steven. He is no better—feels himself to be no better—than other men ; is passionate ; easily beset by temptation ; weakly prone to fall. But he is narrow-minded enough to hold sternest, unflinching opinions concerning honesty and justice ; and the knowledge that he loves Katharine Fane—follows her, dreams of her, thrills at the touch of her hand—comes over him at this moment, accompanied by a sense of something very like dishonour. He looks back to his treatment of Dora from the hour of their marriage to this ; knows that he has never loved her ; knows with what automatic kindness he has sought to hide his want of love ; knows how the happiest hour in the twenty-four has always been that in which, with blessed sense of liberty, he has broken from her side, and found himself free to seek Katharine Fane. Why, to-day, this poor little wife of his fretting for him by the fireside, what guilty hopes—no, not hopes, he has none—what guilty intoxication filled him as he rode along silently watching her face in the twilight ! what madness made him forget everything in the happiness of holding her for a moment in his arms, half-an-hour before Dora's kiss of welcome was to meet his cheek at home ! Was this state of divided allegiance, this hankering after the woman who had deliberately rejected him, a life worthy of a man to lead ? Nay, more, was it not dishonouring to Katharine as to Dora, that the latter, in her inmost heart, should have cause, however slight, either of jealousy or distrust ?

He had loved Miss Fane from the first, you must remember, with a love that the majority of men would disbelieve in, or perhaps possess no line to fathom : even under the first intolerable smart of his disappointment, in the society of Lord Haverstock, and of Lord Haverstock's friends, had formed no theory of women unworthy for one white sister, Katharine, to take her place in it. He might degrade his love ; he might degrade himself ; his ideal of womanhood—so he thought—could never be lowered while Katharine lived ; and in his blind worship of here, all other women, Dora among the rest, had become exalted. He knew his wife to be vain and artificial ; a creature unaccountably made up of small caprices, gold dust, millinery : without an employment, without an interest in life

that he could understand ; but still a woman—with all her smaller demerits, more than worthy of *his* reverence. What worse sins could be laid to Dora's account than undue love for balls and theatres, or perhaps a half-foolish, half-tender feeling for Mr. Clarendon Whyte in days gone by ? Happy for him if his own conscience could show as unblotted a score !

Well, she had conquered now, poor child, and it was best for him that she had done so. In obeying her wishes he would be taken bodily away out of the reach of temptation ; would be forced—not into forgetting, that was impossible—but out of the groove, at least, of loving Katharine Fane ! Would have learnt to live without her before her marriage should divide them more irrevocably still, and for ever. . . .

He thought all this honestly ; and yet, if the inmost desire of his heart could have availed him, Steven's life had been arrested at this very turning-point of its course. Which of us, midway in some doubtful enterprise, has not felt the same ? has not shrunk, cowardly, from the thought of any progress beyond the present scanty good ? He had lost Katharine, but he saw her daily ; was nothing to her but a sort of upper groom, of tolerated humble relation, yet was *that*. The past, with its honied poison, its alternation of fierce joys and miseries, was over ; that moment in the boat when she had let him hold her hands ; that moment on his marriage-day when they had bidden silent farewells, and he had guessed the meaning written on her white face—all over. The future belonged to Dora, and to Lord Petres. If the present—this very bubble on the foam, this very break of the wave upon the shore—would but stay !

And already the wave has broken, the bubble burst. And Dora, upstairs, is tearing Mr. Clarendon Whyte's letter into smallest atoms, while she vacillates in her mind between lilac serge and bronze-brown silk as a suitable costume wherein to travel to Paris.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LANSQUENET AND BACCARAT.

EARLY next morning Mrs. Lawrence, her health already improved, walked over to the Dene, and, not a little to her surprise, found Katharine a powerful auxiliary as to the Paris scheme. Mrs. Hilliard, whose temper was usually fitful on Sunday—it was her custom to replace sensational by theological fiction on that day—went dead against the proposition from the first. Other people in delicate health were obliged to stay winter and summer wherever their husbands chose to live. A wife with her heart in its proper place should look above, not around and outside her own home, for solace and support.

"I do look above, Aunt Arabella," said Dot, "and I see damp, in great patches, all over the ceiling. It's the damp that makes me so ill. As to my heart being in its right place, I very much doubt it—'tis for that I want to have a Paris opinion. Uncle Frank, what do you say? If we have money enough to go, and as Steven is willing to do anything for my health, do you think there's any great sin in my wanting to have eight weeks more of amusement before I settle down in Ashcot for life?"

"I think Paris the worst place possible for you to go to," answered the Squire; early Mabilite recollections, and general visions of extravagance and money-borrowing rising before his mind. "It may be very well for you; but what's your husband, who doesn't know six words of French, to do with himself? Why I—I who speak the language," said the Squire, with pardonable vanity, "always find a week of Paris enough for me. Lawrence is a man taken up with his out-door pursuits. He'll be as miserable as a bandycoot, cooped up in a Paris entresol—and during the best part of the hunting season too!"

"I don't know anything about bandycoots," said Mrs. Lawrence, "but I know *I* am perfectly miserable cooped up alone at Ashcot now! Why are husbands and husbands' amusements always to be studied so much, I want to know? It's very pleasant, no doubt,

Uncle Frank, for Steven to shoot, or course, or hunt every day of the week, with you and Katharine, but why am I not to be considered? I'm a human being, I suppose, although I do labour under the immense disadvantage of being a wife."

And then it was that Katharine, to Dot's astonishment, struck boldly in to the rescue: Katharine, like Steven, had had her lonely meditations, her remorseful vigil the night before! "I agree with you thoroughly, Dot. I think that people like papa and me can't judge how miserable the country is to you in winter. Now, papa, I ask you, mustn't a southerly wind and a cloudy sky seem very different to poor Dot at home, to what they do to you and me just as we skirt round Barlow's wood, a promising soft rain in our face, and hear the first bay of the hounds in the distance? If—if Steven was against this Paris plan it would be different, but he is not; and I say, Dot ought to go. She is not looking strong, just now, at the beginning of winter, a change of air may do wonders for her."

And later in the afternoon, when the cousins were alone together, Katharine did more than express favourable opinions: she offered—Dot faintly protesting against such generosity!—the loan of one hundred pounds, in furtherance of the scheme. "Don't refuse me, dear Dot," she said. "My money lies at the bank, of no use to me, or any one else. Everything I want, and don't want, papa buys me, you know. Sometimes," added Katharine, half-sadly, "I think my fate is to be like that of Miss Kilmansegg. Gold, gold, nothing but gold, and never an ounce of happiness to be bought with it!" and she sighed.

"Well," said Dot, "whoever Miss Kilmansegg may have been, if she had plenty of money, I envy her. My dear Kate, money does everything. If I could keep a carriage, and see my friends about me, and rebuild Ashcot, and have proper servants, and go up to town when I liked, I should be the happiest woman in Kent. Our difference of tastes divides—must divide—Steven and me now; whereas, if we had plenty of money, we should never know whether our tastes were different or not, because each could gratify them."

"And you will accept what I ask you, then?"

"Dear Katharine! You put it in such a way that I feel it impossible to refuse."

So the matter was settled. That night a letter was written, bidding Grizelda Long take the apartments, in Steven's name, off the hands of the Honourable Augustus Dynevor ; and a week later, with packages, said old Barbara, enough for six decent families when she was young, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence again started by the afternoon Folkstone train on their road to Paris.

"It is better so, Kate," said the Squire, on the evening of their departure. "I shall miss Lawrence, and so will you, for a bit ; but I believe it's as well Dot should have her way just at first. When she has gone through two months with Master Steven in an *entresol*, you may take my word for it, she will have had enough of Paris ! The man was never meant to live in cities, and my opinion is we shall see him back here in Clithero before a fortnight is past."

But the Squire's prophecy did not come true ; indeed,—to judge from Dot's letters—it seemed that Steven quickly fell as much under the influence of Parisian enchantment as his wife. At first. "Steven is a little bit puzzled to know what to do with himself," Mrs. Lawrence wrote ; "but we are always together, and I try to interest myself in what I think most likely to interest him." Then, later on, after rose-coloured accounts of balls and parties, for Dot was beginning to make her way into "society." "I can't say that Steven cares for such things," she would say "but he goes, and is very patient." Then, later still : "I have engagements for every afternoon and every evening of the week, and dear Steven, I am glad to say, has found friends and occupations that suit him too. We are perfectly contented, both of us : my health is wonderfully better ; my heart, tell Aunt Arabella, quite in its right place ; and I shall never, never forget that it was chiefly your kindness, Kate, that enabled us to come here."

Steven Lawrence leading a contented town-life with friends, with occupations that suited him ! Katharine, guided by I know not what instinctive fear, despatched a letter at once to George Gordon, who was in Paris, bidding him write her word, without delay, as to how Dora and her husband were getting on. "Dot tells me she goes out a great deal, but among what kind of people !" wrote Miss Fane, "and does her husband accompany her ? Lord

Petres, as you know, is going through his usual Christmas martyrdom at Eccleston, so in his absence I trouble you—will you forgive me?—with my silly questions about the gossip of Paris. Dear Captain Gordon, you are so good always in executing my commissions that I am sure you won't mind finding out as much as you possibly can for me about the Lawrences and the Lawrences' friends, before you write next."

And accordingly, five or six days later, she got back this intelligence :—quite plainly worded, as you see. George Gordon knew Katharine Fane too well to think of putting anything he had to say to her into pretty or dubious phrases : " Your cousin, Mrs. Lawrence, does go out a great deal, among a set of English people to whom, I should say, Miss Long or, perhaps, Mr. Clarendon Whyte must have introduced her. Her husband seldom shows ; never, in the society of his wife. Is he a rich man ? I should hope so. His friends, I hear, are people whose time is chiefly taken up in playing lansquenet and baccarat ; and lansquenet and baccarat are expensive games, when a man first goes through his apprenticeship to them in Paris. I see Mrs. Lawrence daily in the Champs Elysées, and sometimes at the opera, but have not yet been able to speak to her. You know how much love Clarendon Whyte and I had for each other of old ? Well, whenever I have seen Mrs. Lawrence, as yet, Mr. Clarendon Whyte, has happened, unfortunately, to be at her side."

Clarendon Whyte in Paris, the constant companion of Mrs. Lawrence ; Steven going through his apprenticeship at lansquenet and baccarat ! The news seemed so absurdly, so palpably unlikely, that Katharine, for the first five minutes, laughed over George Gordon's letter ; then, calling to mind how Mrs. Dering had ceased, of late, to mention Clarendon Whyte's name ; calling to mind, too, a certain half-tone of concealment, in a good deal that Dot had written about her more intimate English friends ; she went round to the opposite extreme of credulity, and if she had had the means would have flown off herself to Paris, on the instant. True ? what should hinder it, alas ! from being true ? Had she not had a presentiment of evil when she wrote her letter to George Gordon ? What love for Steven had, in reality, ever effaced the old folly from Dora's

heart? What stability of character was there to keep Dora straight under the temptations of Paris? Wearied with uncongenial frivolity at home; with "engagements for every afternoon and every evening of the week;" what more likely than that Steven should seek relief in the society of men abroad, unsuspecting of the perils to which over-much liberty might lead a woman so fickle and so unballasted as his wife! After a day and night of silent anxiety—for neither to her mother nor the Squire had she courage to confess her fears—Katharine made up her mind for action, and started boldly up to town by the earliest morning train, determined to lay bare the state of the case to Mrs. Dering. Slight though the sympathy was between them in matters of sentiment, Katharine had fullest respect still for Mrs. Dering's opinion on all worldly affairs. Dora Lawrence was Arabella's cousin. Dora's good name, the good name of Dora's husband, were subjects in which every member of the family must be supposed to have some degree of vested or vicarious interest. Mrs. Dering had friends of her own in Paris, and could, at least, find out how much truth there was in George Gordon's account; at least could advise what kind of warning or of reproach should be addressed to Dora.

"Bella," she said, within ten minutes of her arrival, "I have come to town to day to see you and the children, of course—but that is not the real object of my visit. I have something very miserable to tell you, something that concerns us all terribly nearly. Read this," and Katharine drew forth George Gordon's letter, and put it, without a word of comment, into her sister's hand.

Mrs. Dering read it through carefully: folded, returned it into its envelope, and to Katharine. "And what is the misery about, Kate! and what is it that concerns us all so nearly?"

"Can you ask?" cried Katharine. "Steven Lawrence spending his time at cards—I suppose they play these horrid games with cards—and Dot—I can't bear to speak of it!—Dot going into a doubtful kind of society alone, or rather with Mr. Clarendon Whyte for her companion! What ought we to do! Shall I write? Shall I get papa to go and look after them?"

Mrs. Dering smiled. "Dora would pay so much attention to your

letter, or to poor dear papa's good advice ! You are honest and single-hearted as ever, Katharine," she added, "and naturally feel disgusted at what you have heard. I take it all as the painful but inevitable consequence of Dora's getting her freedom. She has no principles, my dear, as I have always told you ; and without principles—without principles, a woman as vain and as fond of pleasure as poor Dora is tolerably sure to end . . . as she is doing ! We must hope for the best," added Mrs. Dering, calmly ; "and really so many people have taken up this fashion of being fast that what once would have put a woman out of society, as likely as not may pass unobserved now. We hear nothing very bad as yet, you must recollect."

"I don't know what you call bad !" said Katharine, hotly. "For a woman as young and pretty as Dot to go about in Paris without her husband, and for the husband to spend his time with his own gambling associates, seems bad enough to me. Bella, tell me candidly, had you heard anything of this before ?" cried poor Katharine. "Had you an idea that Dot and Clarendon Whyte were meeting again like this in Paris ?"

"I knew that Mr. Whyte was in Paris, and I knew that Dora Lawrence was there, dressing and driving, and living altogether in very bad style. But small gossip, as you know, Kate," said Mrs. Dering, "is not one of my sins. I heard these things, but I did not repeat them, even to you all at home. If one's relations are discreditable, I never see that anything is to be gained by making a noise about their discreditability one's self."

Katharine was silent for a minute or two. "I am quite determined to do something," she cried at last. "Dot may be foolish and fond of show and attention, but I know she will always mind what I say to her. As to her husband—"

"As to her husband—this baccarat-playing husband ?"

"Steven is too upright, too simple of heart to suspect evil in others," said Katharine, slowly, and lifting her eyes full to Mrs. Dering's. "He may, or may not, be losing his money at cards ; at one time, I remember, when—when he left off coming to the Dene, papa used to tell me he played too high at Lord Haverstock's ; used to say that gambling, in some form or other, runs in the Lawrences' blood. All

this is no business of ours. It is of Dot and of Mr. Whyte that I am thinking, and I say Steven in his ignorant confidence might see no evil in an intimacy that a man of the world—Bella, I can't talk about it—there's a disgrace even in the suspicion of disgrace ! but I'll go to them. I'll make papa take me over to Paris, and I'll bid Steven bring his wife home to Ashcot at once."

An indignant light shone in Katharine Fane's eyes. "You are very enthusiastic, child," said Mrs. Dering, coldly ; "above all I remark, in matters where Steven Lawrence is concerned. If you take my advice you will just let these people manage their own affairs themselves. Mrs. Lawrence, like a good many wives, is more amused by other society than by her husband's ; Mr. Lawrence, like a good many husbands, is more amused by baccarat and trente-et-un than by his wife. Of all things not new under the sun a household like this is the one that the least calls for hysterics or astonishment."

But Katharine seemed hardly to listen to Mrs. Dering's optimist and sufficiently-reasonable philosophy. "If it was any one else," she said, half to herself, "any other man than Mr. Clarendon Whyte, I should not feel as I do."

"And I," said Mrs. Dering, "precisely because it is Mr. Clarendon Whyte, am disposed to be charitable. Mr. Whyte—we had best speak openly, Kate—is the last man living to ask Mrs. Steven Lawrence—without position, without money, without anything !—to run away from her husband."

"I—I am not thinking of running away !" cried Katharine, her face afire.

"Then what *are* you thinking of, Kate, dear ? Please let us be reasonable. As a companion in her drives, or a partner at these third-class balls, it seems to me that Dora could hardly have done better than select Mr. Clarendon Whyte. In London, I confess, it would be different ; but in Paris, particularly among such a set as Dora has got into, Mr. Clarendon Whyte, no doubt, is taken at his own valuation still."

"Taken at his own valuation ! in London it would be different !" said Katharine, opening her eyes. "I don't think when we were at Brighton you would have spoken like that, Arabella. You seem to

think of Clarendon Whyte now what I, unsupported, have thought of him always."

"Exactly so," said Mrs. Dering, with perfect evenness of temper. "Did I not tell you—no? then, that does show how little I am to be accused of writing gossiping letters! Some weeks ago, just about the time you returned to Clithero, I think it must have been, all poor Mr. Whyte's true and authentic history came to light, and he has never shown his face either in London or Brighton since. He really was an impostor, Katharine. You were perfectly right in everything you used to say. Some one appeared on the scene—who was it now? well, never mind, some one who knew all about him, anyhow—and the great English connections, and the tigers he had shot in Bengal, and the sacks he had caused to be thrown into the Bosphorus, were all a fiction. His father was a hatter in Oxford Street. Are you sure you won't have a glass of sherry? I'm afraid you will have more than an hour to wait before lunch."

"And you have never seen him since?—I don't want any sherry, thanks. You have banished the man from your house, because his father was a hatter?"

"I have done nothing at all," said Mrs. Dering, with a quiet smile. "I met Mr. Clarendon Whyte at a ball just after this ridiculous story came to light, and he asked me for a dance, and I had none left to give him. A man in that kind of position ought to have come early, or not have attempted to dance. I think, myself, it would have been more dignified, perhaps, to have stayed away altogether. A day or two afterwards I heard he left England. What strange vicissitudes there are in some human beings' lives, Kate!"

"And what strange blanks in some human beings' hearts!" thought Katharine, looking at her sister's handsome unmoved face. "I never cared, or pretended to care, for Mr. Clarendon Whyte," she cried, hastily; "but if I had seen as much of him as you did, Bella—and really he used to be kind to the children, was fond of little Floss, I think—I should have been sorry for him in his humiliation, or what he considered to be humiliation."

"And so I was extremely sorry for him," said Mrs. Dering, "and I always speak well of him now—poor young man! Whatever his

birth may have been, I say Mr. Clarendon Whyte had the feelings of a gentleman ; would the General and I have seen so much of him had it been otherwise ? As to his conquests in Indian jungles and elsewhere, is there a man or woman amongst us all who doesn't kill rather more tigers in imagination than in fact ? The principal commandment Mr. Whyte broke, I fancy, was the eleventh—that which outweighs all the rest ; he was found out. How is Lord Petres ? Still at Eccleston, I suppose ? If you do go to Paris, I should strongly advise you to get some of your trousseau there. Dot, with all her faults, is as good an adviser as you can find where silks and velvets are concerned."

Thus, with more of the same nature, spoke Mrs. Dering ; honestly, and according to her lights. The world to her was a theatre, where men and women acted together in masks ; where what was said or done, sinned or suffered, unmasked and behind the scenes, mattered nothing. As long as Mr. Clarendon Whyte was "received," she had received him. As long as the Lawrences went on like other people, not coming to any open or avowed disgrace, there was something simply ridiculous to Mrs. Dering in gratuitously troubling one's head on their account. If they did come to disgrace, let it pass—with as little spoken commentary of ours, the well-thought-of relations, as possible ! As for advice, a tolerably wide experience of life had taught her that its general effects were : first, to increase the downhill pace of the persons advised ; secondly, to react against the adviser. If Mrs. Lawrence (as it must be allowed was possible) was walking just as straight as the rest of the world, there could be no need of Katharine's presence in Paris ; if Mrs. Lawrence was walking crooked Katharine, for her own sake, must keep away from her. What would be the effect of a letter to Steven ? Mrs. Dering was too ignorant of the customs of savage nations to say what the effect of anything would be on Steven Lawrence. She would certainly not advise writing to any civilized man on a theme so delicate as his own wife's frivolities. Baccarat, it must be remembered, could not, of its very nature, last for ever ; neither could driving in the Champs Elysées in daily new bonnets and dresses. As soon as the money was exhausted, Kate might rest assured Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence, steady-going Darby and Joan, would again return to their farm.

But all Mrs. Dering's reasoning, all Mrs. Dering's admirable morality of selfishness, was insufficient to banish the haunting fear that had taken possession of Katharine's mind ; and so, two days later, a letter from Dora coming meanwhile, with still no mention in it of Clarendon Whyte's name, she mustered courage enough to broach the subject to the Squire. The wisdom of a kind and simple heart might be more serviceable than the wisdom of the world, perhaps, in such a strait as this. "Papa," quite abruptly she began, as they were riding home to dinner, along the same road where she had ridden that last night with Steven, "what sort of game do you consider baccarat ?"

"Baccarat?" said the Squire ; "well, I've never played it myself and never seen it played ; but I know it is the favourite game now-a-days, at which Englishmen abroad are fleeced by those rascally foreigners. Haverstock lost eight thousand pounds at it, they say, the first time he went to Paris after he came of age. Pray, Miss Kate, what has put baccarat into that wise head of yours ?"

"Steven Lawrence is playing at it, papa, that's all. I heard so a day or two ago ; but I did not like at first to tell you, and Dot is going on very extravagantly, I'm afraid. I found it all out by accident, from a correspondent I have. Bella has heard the same story too, and—and don't you think we ought to do something to try and bring them home ?"

Mr. Hilliard was dead silent ; sure sign that one of the quick bursts of passion that occasionally exploded in the good little man's heart, was brewing. "The confounded fool that I've been !" he exclaimed at last. "Leaving the poor girl's money in her own hands, as he 'generously' wished, instead of tying it up, principal and interest, as tight as I could tie it. Of course he's playing at baccarat ! I might have known the stock he comes of well enough to be sure he would play baccarat, and every other devilment, when temptation came. Gambling with his wife's money, and then, when it's gone, expecting me to lend him more ! But he's mistaken ; Master Lawrence is deucedly mistaken, if he thinks I am going to supply him with money for his pleasant vices. Baccarat, too ! a man whose grandfather was no better than a day-labourer, and who can barely spell his name himself, playing baccarat !"

Katharine fired up in a moment. "I don't see that the condition of a man's grandfather heightens or lessens the folly of his gambling, papa; and I don't know why we should take for granted that Steven, if he is losing at all, is losing Dot's money."

"He must be losing," cried the Squire, angrily, and with the perfect conviction of injustice,—“and he must be losing her money—what other money has he got to lose? But it is no business of mine, it's no business of mine! If my advice had been taken, they would never have gone to Paris at all. Let him ruin himself. Dora will always know where to look for a home as long as I live; but don't let him come to me for help, that's all I have to tell Master Lawrence. Don't let him look to me for help.”

"I hear too," said Katharine, determined, now that she had begun, to tell her whole story out, "I hear that Dora is very extravagant; is—is not going on as we could wish. She is always out at balls and theatres, papa, and alone—without her husband, I mean."

"Very naturally," said Mr. Hilliard. "You wouldn't have the poor girl run after him to the gaming tables and his associates there, would you? You knew what Dora was when you advised her to go to Paris. Of course she is extravagant. Not one woman in fifty, let me tell you, would care to be saving over francs when she knew that her husband was ruining himself and her too by hundreds of pounds."

"And who says Steven Lawrence is doing anything of the kind?" exclaimed Katharine. "Oh, papa, I see I had better be perfectly honest with you. It's not Steven—it's not about Steven's going on that I am anxious, but about Dot. She is in a fast, bad set of people in Paris. She lets herself be seen everywhere with a man for whom she had a foolish kind of half-liking before she married, and altogether I'm afraid is getting her name lightly spoken of. I didn't like to tell you this straight out, and so I began first about Steven and his card-playing. Oh, papa, what does the loss of a little money matter? It is Dot we must think about, and bring back to Ashcot at once, if we can."

"Bring Dot back?" stammered the Squire. "Why, Kate, you don't mean to tell me—good God, child! what does all this mean?"

why have you tried to keep it from me?" The Squire reined in his horse to a standstill, and his face got as red as fire. "You don't mean to tell me that that girl—her honeymoon scarce over, and in love, as I thought, with her husband's very shadow—is misconducting herself?"

"Papa, dear," answered Katharine, with down-bent head, "there are many things that people do in the world—the fast world—now, that you would call misconduct. As much as I know about Dora, I tell you. She goes to balls and parties continually. She is seen at them all without her husband, and in the society of another man. People generally may think lightly of this, but I, knowing Steven as I do, think it looks very bad for poor Dora's future happiness."

"Then why don't he look after her?" said Mr. Hilliard. "She's vain, and pretty in her style; just the sort of little woman—poor thing!—that these confounded Frenchmen would make much of. Why don't Lawrence look better after her?"

The Squire loosened his reins, and they walked on again through the darkening lanes in silence. At last, "Do you think if I was to write to Steven I should do good?" Katharine asked. "Just hint to him that it would be better if——"

"If he were to look a little closer after his own honour? No, Katharine, no! Never meddle between married people." The Squire said this much in the same tone in which he might have said "Never meddle with burning pitch!" "However things turn out, *you* are sure to get blamed by both of them in the end."

"That's a good deal like what Arabella told me. Her advice was to let everything take its own course. But—oh, papa!" cried Katharine, "you and Arabella generally see everything so differently, that, I must confess, I did not expect to hear the same counsel from you."

Mr. Hilliard, upon this, put his horse into a trot; and nothing more was said until they were riding up the avenue at home. "Kate my dear," he began then, "you were right to tell me of all this, and I'm ready to allow I spoke unjustly about Lawrence. The life he has led makes the lad younger than his years, and many an honest enough man will burn his fingers, for once in his life, under temptation. Dora is a little fool—that we always knew!—but we

let her play the fool worse or longer than we can help. Now, what do you want me to do, child?"

"I want you take me to Paris for a week," cried Katharine; "that is, if mamma can spare us. It wouldn't be a great expense?"

"Never mind the expense," said the Squire.

"And either we would bring Dot home with us, or make Steven promise to take better care of her in Paris. Whether we fail or not, isn't it at least worth the trial?"

And before bed-time that night the plan was settled. Poor Mrs. Hilliard at first was refractory: could not see how Dora's affairs mattered to them now that she was married: could see, still less, why sick and dying people were to be sacrificed because of the ill-doings of those in health. She would go up to Arabella—no, she would not: she would destroy herself by going to Paris: no, she would be a blessed martyr and stay at home, and hope—hope that they would enjoy themselves without her! Finally the scheme of martyrdom carried the day: the Squire promising to bring back a Cashmere shawl, silk dress, laces, and gloves, as propitiatory offerings; and, on the following Monday, two days hence, it was decided that Katharine and Mr. Hilliard should start. Not a word was to be written meanwhile to the Lawrences themselves. "If you want to know what a truant schoolboy is about," said the Squire, "don't tell him beforehand that you are coming to look after him! If we want really to find out how Dora and her husband are going on, we must walk quietly some fine morning to their lodgings, and just see them in their usual every-day life—don't you say so, Arabella?"

"I say nothing, Mr. Hilliard. I am too old-fashioned to enter into these philanthropic schemes. When I and my Richard were young it was accounted a man's duty to consider his *own* wife, to attend to the happiness of his *own* household, not of other people's!"

And then Mrs. Hilliard closed her eyes: to dream, undisturbed, about cachemires and silks, Parisian laces and gloves—a little, perhaps of the days when she and her Richard were young, and when no such conditions of martyrdom were, under any circumstances, imposed upon her!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN PARIS.

DURING the first week after his arrival in Paris, Steven Lawrence's life was only passively miserable. The mild, open winter, that had been so excellent for hunting in Kent, was detestable to him amidst the closeness and mud and fog of city streets ; but he endured it. Endured being marched up and down the piazzas of the Palais Royal and of the Rue de Rivoli of a morning ; endured theatres of an evening ; endured living in rooms wherein his large figure had scarcely space to turn, and against the ceiling of which he knocked his head if he attempted to stand upright ; endured millinery ; endured *Dora* ! And, at the end of the week, said to himself : " I have gone through one-eighth of it already. Seven weeks more, and I shall be on the farm, almost free again !" After this came brighter weather ; also *Grizelda Long*, who had been absent for a few days, and on her return to Paris at once constituted herself a daily visitor of *Dora's* ; and then Steven's sufferings, from passive, became acute ones.

Grizelda Long at this time was on one of the lowest spokes even in her poor fortune's wheel. Unpaid companion, half lady's-maid, half-interpreter, to a capricious, vulgar woman (the same Indian widow who had once been the mainstay of the *Knightsbridge* household) : with a good deal of time on her hands, for the widow had friends of her own, " to whom, of course, poor *Miss Long* could not expect to be introduced ;" and with no money in her pockets. These were the conditions under which *Grizelda* was living out the present portion of her phantom existence ! " Just beginning my delightful campaign in Paris," the poor soul wrote, with unflagging cheerfulness, to her London friends. But what, to another woman, would have been *durance viler* than the lot of a seamstress, sewing her fingers to the bone in her own attic, was bearable to *Grizelda*. She was floating still ! Still able to run after odds and ends of society ; to organize these odds and ends together ; to intrigue among them ; occasionally—despite the widow—to show her forlorn wreathed

head in third-class salons, and such concert-rooms and theatre-boxes as her friends, of their charity, would give her the right to enter.

"I know every one," she told Dora, on the first occasion of their meeting. "Lady Cowley and the Russian ambassadress have unfortunately both got influenza, so, for the moment, I can do nothing for you there. But I know all the ball-giving English, and numbers of excellent French people, and I shall be very glad to introduce you. What carriage have you got? My dear Mrs. Lawrence, do you mean to say your husband has got you no carriage? I assure you it is a mistake. It does not *do*," said Grizelda, at this moment possessing about fifty-six francs in the world, "to be seen in any of these voitures de remise. Now for—I forget how much a week, but we'll ascertain to-day—you can hire the very brougham the Dynevors had. Capital horse, English coachman, dark brown livery; no one would know it was hired."

Dora answered, that a brougham, even a brougham hired by the week, would be extravagance entirely beyond her husband's means: then lay awake half the night regretfully dreaming of it. Next day, the weather happening to be wet again, she spoilt a new dress by walking to their restaurant dinner—those cheap Palais Royal dinners at which Steven was so starved, but which were a remove better than the horrible attempt his wife made once of cooking something at home! And then, as a matter of economy, the hiring of a brougham, with an English coachman in brown livery, began, day and night, to be urged upon Dora's husband.

This, I say, was the beginning of the poor fellow's active sufferings. He did not want to squander what little money he had of his own (the Squire had already lent him a considerable sum to put out upon his farm, and the thought of the debt pressed heavily on him); he would have been more loth still for Dora to touch the capital of her small marriage-portion; and kindly, but with no lack of determination, he told her that the thing was impossible. Cabs he would hire for her, as many and as often as she wished. She need not drive even in the common fiacre of the streets. One of the better kind of *Americaines* she might have, with as clean a driver, for a Frenchman, as could be found, six days a week—nothing as yet

would induce him to let Dora amuse herself on Sunday—but a brougham, no ! Grizelda Long and her opinions might be—very valuable, indeed, in their proper place. He was not going to be guided by them. He was not (with extreme resolution this) going to set up a sham-private brougham, with a sham-private coachman, and ridiculous hired livery, to please any one.

At the end of some hours, after holding further council with her friend : “ If you please, Steven,” said Dora, “ as you will not spend your money to please me, may I spend my own ? I have a hundred pounds in my desk lying useless . . . oh, look incredulous ! I’ll show them to you—Bank of England notes . . . May I spend them—I mean a few of them—in hiring the brougham ? It will save you expense in the end.”

“ Do as you choose,” said Steven, turning from her. “ I have given my opinion. Act as you like for the future.”

So the first fruit of Katharine’s generosity was the setting Mrs. Dora up in her hired brougham, which soon, with the small rose-and-white over-dressed doll it contained, became pretty well known in the eyes of a certain portion of the Parisian public. Dora, just at first, professed herself averse to driving alone, and poor dear Grizelda’s bonnets, she said, were really so unlike what bonnets ought to be, that, whatever one’s kindly feelings, it was impossible to be seen with her by daylight ; it was therefore manifestly incumbent on Steven to be his wife’s companion. Living in rooms where he could neither breathe nor stand upright, obliged to dress daily in a frock-coat and high hat, dining on Palais Royal dishes that at once sickened and starved him, and now crushed into a little toy-brougham, of which one window at least must always be shut up for fear of Dora’s complexion, or because the damp took the curl out of feathers, or the crimp out of hair, or other cogent reason !

He bore it for three days ; bore physical sufferings almost equaling those of a wild animal in its eight feet of cage ; then struck boldly : “ He would do many things ; would never—so help him heaven !—torture his limbs into a cursed close car no bigger than a nut-shell again while he lived.”

“ You needn’t use bad language, my dear,” said Dora, with

thorough amiability ; had the domestic drives been so animated that she need mourn over their discontinuance ? "Amuse yourself well," kissing her hand to him as she ran, full-dressed, out of the room, "and I, if I can, must find some one else willing to take your place."

Was this meant as a threat, Steven wondered afterwards ? Who shall say ? Who shall tell whether it was by purest accident or otherwise that when Mrs. Lawrence left her carriage by the lake (for this January afternoon was like June, and all the world went to the Bois) she heard the only human voice that had power to make her heart—such a heart as she possessed—flutter, and turning round saw Mr. Clarendon Whyte, unapproachable in his gloves and neck-tie as ever, and with beautiful, cruel, Mephistophelian smile at her side !

After a surly husband at home, a surly husband using bad words about one's few poor little pleasures, what a change to be in the society of a being whose every mellifluous word is a reproach, flattering to vanity ; whose every look is a compliment ! . . . "I have seen you before more than once, but not near enough to bow," said Dot, quietly ; for whether the meeting was planned or accidental it did not seem that either was much taken by surprise now that they had met.

"I heard you had arrived, but didn't know whether I ought to call on your—husband," answered Mr. Whyte, with an accent, tragic-pathetic, on that word "husband," that made Dora turn her face away, and almost believe in her own mind that she was blushing.

The January afternoon was like June ; and Mrs. Lawrence, well-dressed and animated, met nothing but admiring glances as she walked up and down in the clear winter sunshine with Mr. Clarendon Whyte. Poor little butterfly Dot ! It was the brightest hour by far that she had known since her marriage, this first hour of amusement in which Steven had no part. He was a good, dear honest creature, Steven, and in her very heart she believed she was growing to be fond of him. But then Mr. Clarendon Whyte's coat was so differently cut, and the turn of his moustache was so faultless, and his low calibre of intellect—I use her own words—suited hers so exactly, and this was Paris sunshine, and she was one of the prettiest women walking by that sunny mock lake. And—ah—ah ! (without

going too deeply into analyzation of one's happiness) if all life could only be like to-day !

All life certainly could not be ; only six more weeks and a fraction, thought Dot ; then let the six weeks and a fraction be turned to the best possible account. So next day, the sun continuing to shine, the brown brougham at the same hour stopped by the lake, and a porcelain marchioness figure, with short fair locks and glittering equipments, tripped out, to be joined in ten minutes by an Adonis almost as glittering as herself. And the next day the same thing took place ; and the next . . . as the two were walking along : Dot listening with well-pleased face to her companion's murmured platitudes, yet not unmindful of the admiration her own toilette was awakening in the crowd : Steven maladroitly, inopportunately, as is the habit of these old-fashioned husbands, came across their path.

He stopped for a moment, spoke good-humouredly to his wife, not uncivilly to Mr. Clarendon Whyte ; then went on his way, thereby showing more knowledge of life, Dora felt, than might have been expected of him. In the evening, as they were sitting alone in their apartment—for now Mrs. Lawrence had organized a plan of having execrable dinners sent in from a neighbouring cook-shop—"Dora," said Steven, all at once, "how long have you known that your friend, Mr. Whyte, was in Paris?"

"Oh, not till to-day," said Dora, rather from sudden loss of self-possession than from a guilty sense that there was anything to conceal. "Mr. Clarendon Whyte has just come to Paris—that is I didn't know he was here before, and—and he is going to call on you to-morrow, Steven."

"He is very kind," said Steven laconically.

"It will be pleasant for you to know some one—to be able to associate with men when you are tired of me," cried Dora. "Mr. Whyte, if you like, will introduce you at his club. He told me so to-day."

"He is very kind," said Steven once more ; then took up his hat and went out—the first time he had done so yet of an evening—leaving Dot to her own thoughts.

Did he suspect her, she wondered uneasily, as soon as she found

herself alone? Suspect her, not of the letter that had been written and answered from Ashcot—that was impossible; but of prevarication? Did he know that she and Clarendon Whyte had already met? Was he going to watch, to mistrust, to coerce her? In about an hour's time Steven came in again. He walked up to the table where Dot as usual was working her brain over some new combination of gorgeous colour for to-morrow, took both her hands, and drawing her to him, bade her, in the kind of way one would bid a child, look him straight in the face. "Don't tell me falsehoods any more, my dear," he said, in a voice that brought the facile tears into Dot's eyes. "You were walking yesterday with Clarendon Whyte, and what was there in it to hide? Walk with him, with any one you choose, every day of the week. Amuse yourself and get strong and well, my poor little Dora, but don't tell me a falsehood again!"

"And never while I live, Steven!" cried Mrs. Lawrence in a flutter of repentance. "I was afraid you might be cross—I can't help it, you know, but I *am* a very little bit afraid of you always. And then," holding down her face, "as I was jealous once about you and Kate, I thought perhaps——"

"I should be jealous about Mr. Clarendon Whyte?" said Steven, with a chill sort of laugh. "Set your mind at rest, child. When I am jealous of my wife it will be once, and only once; not without cause, you may be sure!"

She held up her face; she threw her arms round his neck. "You'll never have cause to be jealous of me, Steven! Don't let us even talk of such horrible things. Now, how could you possibly know, dearest, that I saw Mr. Clarendon Whyte yesterday? And to think—deceitful man!—of your never mentioning it to me!"

"Nay," said Steven quietly, "I waited for you to mention it. How I knew it," he added, "was by using my own eyes. I was close behind you when you got out of your carriage by the pond; but you were too much occupied with other people to look at me."

To this extent peace was made; to this extent the renewal of Dora's intimacy with Mr. Clarendon Whyte was sanctioned by Dora's husband. Closely following came a time when little Mrs. Lawrence began to get invitations to balls, through Grizelda Long, through Cla-

rendon Whyte, through any one, every one, who could open for her the easy portals of second-class Anglo-Parisian society. And again as at first starting of the brougham, Steven's attendance was enforced for a week. The torture of standing for hours in the corners of crowded ball-rooms was not physically as unendurable as being imprisoned in a small close carriage for an afternoon at a time, but was bad enough. He did not dance himself ; had never, indeed, seen the inside of a ball-room till now ; and there was nothing edifying to him in the spectacle of his wife waltzing with every well-gilt fop—Mr. Clarendon Whyte most—who chose to invite her. So after a week or ten days of ball-going, amicably, without a word of remonstrance on either side, it grew to be a thing of course that Steven should just accompany his wife to the scene of her night's dissipation, stand patiently with his hat under his arm for two dances or so, then slip away unnoticed from the house, and go home to his bed.

Dot found that she breathed immeasurably freer after he was gone. Poor dear fellow ! it took away one's enjoyment to know that there was a long-suffering husband, standing like a statue, martyred for one's selfish pleasure night after night, and really, if one thought of it, what numbers of other married women went out alone, Mrs. D——, and Madame C——, and little Lady B—— (poor inch-deep Dora, in what a wake to follow !). What need was there to torture him by that nightly putting on of dress suit and white gloves at all ? Could she not chaperon Grizelda, find some one or other to go with—manage to spare dear Steven, at all events ? She managed it ; dear Steven acquiescing only too readily ; and before many days were over was classed by the world in precisely the same rank with her precedents, Mrs. D——, and Madame C——, and little Lady B—— ; light, ball-going young women, with more or less of character between them all, and with husbands too indifferent or too large-minded to heed the lateness of their wives' hours.

Katharine Fane had said rightly that Steven was too straight-forward, too simple of heart, to suspect evil in others ; but, unhappily, this very straightforwardness, this very simplicity, rendered him the most unsuited of all guides for a woman like Dora. A man of the world might have given her a reasonable degree of freedom, and yet

have held her in wholesome fear as well. To Steven, in this as in everything, there was no medium course. If his wife chose to go her own road once, she might go ! For married women—dressed as women under the empire do dress—to waltz through the midnight hours in their husband's absence, seemed to him one degree less shameful than for them to do so in their husband's sight. The first time that he ever saw Dot ball-clad and waltzing, he underwent a feeling of mingled disgust, indignation, and abasement—a feeling for which I scarce, indeed, know how to find a fitting name. After that night, with or without his presence, smiling upon Mr. Clarendon Whyte or upon another, or upon a score of others, he felt that it could matter little to him. Dora had lost her prestige, the ineffable bloom of decent womanhood with which his imagination had invested her : let it pass ! She was not, would never be again, what he had once thought her, yet was no worse, he told himself, than other women of the world ; was frivolous and pleasure-seeking ; about as good a companion for him, Steven Lawrence (Lord Petres' words verified already) as a gilded butterfly would have been, but had loved him enough to become his wife, and so merited infinite forbearance,—infinite patience at his hands ! He was, as he had said, a man capable of being jealous once, and only once. He might feel humiliated, confessing to himself that his humiliation was the result of ignorance, at seeing his wife among the crowd of a Parisian ball-room. Small doubts, small fears, small suspicions could have no place in Steven's breast. Poor little Dora was taking her pleasure now, to fortify herself against the inevitable years to come at Ashcot ; and to himself the dressing and the enamelling and the dancing of fashionable ladies was repugnant, like his dinners, like his lodgings, like everything, in short, that belonged to this artificial city life. But only four more weeks of it remained ! four more weeks and he would be back in England, working on his farm, breathing pure country air, sometimes seeing Katharine's face. Oh, for some way to make these interminable thirty days pass quicker !

A man of seven-and-twenty, of keen excitement-craving temperament, companionless in Paris, not without money in his pockets, and seeking desperately, but in vain, to make the time pass. To this singularly anomalous pass had Steven Lawrence's life now arrived.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MADEMOISELLE BARRY.

IT was his habit to rise early ; even in these January mornings was often dressed and abroad in the twilight Champs Elysées or dusky streets before eight o'clock. At eleven, after a three hours' walk, he would come home to breakfast, at which meal his wife, if not too tired, appeared in dressing-gown and crimping pins, her face white (more slightly so in Steven's eyes than with the finer complexion it assumed towards noon), her eyes dark and hollow, her hands shaky, her heart and soul occupied with last night's conquests and to-day's projects ; all of which, with discreet reservations, she poured forth, not unamusingly, into her husband's ears as she sipped her chocolate. After breakfast generally arrived the milliner, hairdresser, dressmaker, or other finery factor for rehearsal of to-night's performance, or this afternoon's, or this morning's—Dora was sufficiently advanced now to require at the least four elaborate changes of dress a day—and then the master of the establishment perforce must turn out again into the streets.

The apartment that, as Dot would say, "had been sufficient for the Honourable Augustus Dynevor and his wife," was an undeniable apartment as far as situation went ; an apartment rich in carved cornices and brackets—against which Steven, being inconveniently tall, knocked his head : also in Utrecht velvets, ormolu, and mirrors. "A bijou of an apartment," it was described in the lists of Messrs. Arthur and Webb ; possessing indeed only the trifling drawback that neither fresh air nor light could enter the two six-foot square dungeons called bed-rooms. To fresh air Mrs. Lawrence was as beautifully indifferent as to most other natural phenomena ; but light, and strong light, is imperatively needful for toilette-tables of the second empire ; and so, "just till midday, just till anybody was likely to call, *would* dear Steven mind being out ?" thus allowing M. Alphonse, the hairdresser, or Mademoiselle Aglaë, the work girl, the use of the salon. He turned out, whatever the weather, with perfect cheerfulness ; often before he went, poor big Steven would be bidden to hold a

satin in these folds, or a velvet in that light, while Dot retired, as far as the limited space would allow, to form artistic judgment of its effects. Then commenced the daily task of time-killing ; the daily weary walks in which, with the inevitable lack of interest of an uneducated man, he would traverse Paris from one end to the other and find it all blank. No deeper significance than stones and cements in the palaces, no pathos in the grey old churches, no heart-stirring history in these imperial boulevards replacing the old streets where the carmagnole was danced, the *ça ira* sung, and where a king and queen once passed along upon the tumbril to die ! All was blank to Steven Lawrence, just as a picture is blank to a child's intelligence until its meaning has been pointed out by some one better taught than himself. Paris was a vast mart of expensive toys, he saw ; toys through which it was his present lot to walk with closed pockets and averted eyes, but of which his wife, in the millinery department, might take her fill. A mart in which it was his portion to wander unoccupied from morning till night, seeking to kill the implacable enemy that every day grew more vital, with home interludes of barbers and dressmakers, scandal in which he took no interest, and gold powdering, dressing, enamelling, and general rehearsing for a world in whose scenes he bore, and wished to bear, no part.

His favourite resting-place of a forenoon, when it happened neither to rain nor snow, and when even his stout limbs grew tired of ceaseless pacing along the pavement, was the Luxembourg Gardens. He never felt so little in Paris as when he sat down there under the leafless chestnuts, smoking (he smoked ten hours a day now) in the morning sunshine, and with only children and nurses, an occasional priest, book in hand, or slow-paced grey old pensioner to break the solitude. And so to the sunny Luxembourg one sunny forenoon, destined to begin an episode of some importance in his life, Steven Lawrence went ; sat down on his accustomed bench ; lit his cigar, and began to think—of Ashcot and Katharine, and how to-day, Wednesday, she and the Squire would be riding to the meet, and if the weather at home was like this, what a day for hunting it would be with the sun breaking the night's thin frost, and a blue sky already sprinkled with promising fleecy clouds overhead !

... "Kate, my child," said a man's voice, in English but with a curious half-foreign, half-Irish accent ; "are you sure now that it's not too cold for you to be sitting down ?"

Steven started, his heart set beating in a moment, and saw, not his—I mean not Lord Petres'—Kate, but a pale, poorly-dressed little girl of nineteen or twenty, in the act of sitting down by him on the bench, and with an elderly man, evidently from the likeness between them her father, on her other side.

"It isn't too cold for me, papa," she said, in one of those fresh flute-like voices that, if you are fortunate, you may come across three or four times in your life ; and then Steven turned his head, irresistibly attracted, and looked at her full.

The girl was not handsome, still less pretty, yet hers was a face few men could pass unnoticed even amidst the meretricious beauty, the fine complexions and bright-hued locks of the Champs Elysées or the boulevards. The pale cheeks, the brown hair drawn straight off the temples, the plain little bonnet, the well-worn black silk frock, all told of a woman shunning rather than courting attention. And still you were forced to attend to her ! to remark that she had a slender foot and hand ; a graceful tread ; that the dress, however poor, was exquisitely clean and modest—in fine, that something more than beauty drew a sharp line of demarcation between her and the crowd of women amongst whom she walked. She looked with a pair of deep-set grey eyes straight up at Steven. He felt as if she had spoken to him ; took his cigar from his lips and flung it away.

"Pray don't let us disturb you, sir," said the father, looking round and slightly raising his hat. "My little daughter is not very strong, and I chose this bench for her to be in the sun ; but pray don't leave off smoking, or we shall feel that we have disturbed you."

The tone would have been that of a well-bred man, had it not been just a shade more polite, more apologetic than the occasion required. But Steven, never hypercritical, was glad of the sound of an English voice, and in a few minutes' time found himself talking, or rather listening while the stranger talked, about all the current gossip of Paris : the Emperor's last racehorse, and the Empress's last carriage, the increasing price of apartments, and the new piece that

was to be brought out at the Opéra Comique—the usual innocuous gossip with which Englishmen abroad are forced to supplant our national staple of politics and weather as material for small-talk.

“Well, I have no doubt that Paris, for people with town tastes, is all that you say,” said Steven at last, the stranger having given his opinion as to the superiority of Paris over every other European city. “For myself, I speak openly, I’ve never been so tired of my life as during these few weeks I’ve spent here. Bricks and mortar don’t concern me. I find more to look at in a forest or prairie than in all the palaces and show-places that were ever built.”

A quiet little smile came round the corners of the girl’s lips. “Do you see nothing interesting in the show-place we are sitting under?” she said, glancing up over her shoulder at the grey walls of the Luxembourg.

“Nothing at all,” answered Steven. “It’s a fine building—so are the Madeleine and the Bourse, and when you have seen one, you have seen all of them. In a prairie—in an English turnip-field—you will find life, of one sort or another, and change. In palaces and churches you have dead bricks and mortar, nothing more.”

“And all that the bricks and mortar, all that this old Luxembourg must have looked on at when your prairies and fields were—just what they are to-day, and will be till the end of the world! Why,” the girl’s eyes kindled, “I think one can hardly look up at those windows above us without seeing the prisoners’ eager white faces crowding there—the prisoners, don’t you remember, who heard the tocsin and saw men wave to them from the housetops, but didn’t know whether Robespierre’s downfall was to mean their deliverance or their death?”

Steven was silent. He had learned French history at school—for Joshua Lawrence always conscientiously bade the master give him as good an education as could be got for money—but at this lapse of time had grown uncertain about names and dates. Joan of Arc he remembered, and St. Bartholomew’s massacre; but who was Robespierre? and had the tocsin sounded a hundred years ago or yesterday?

“My little daughter is wonderfully fond of these dry subjects,”

said the father in his suave manner. "I assure you there is scarcely a street or building in Paris she doesn't tell me some quaint history about as we walk along. We live quietly you see, sir, and her time is spent wholly at her books or pencil, or in walking with me. Now if—if it would pass an hour to you to take a stroll with us sometimes, as you don't seem to have overmuch to do with your time?"

The proposal by most men would have been held an equivocal one; but Steven accepted it without the faintest detrimental suspicion of his new friends. He had been accustomed, in the backwoods, to see acquaintances formed without letters of introduction, generally without men knowing or seeking to know each other's names, and it did not occur to him that greater circumspection was usual in the life of civilization. The girl meanwhile sat dead-silent, her hands clasped together on her lap, and looking straight away through the long vistas of the leafless chestnuts.

"It's the fashion for Englishmen abroad to hold aloof from each other as if each was a convicted felon," said the father, with a pleasant smile (he was a handsome, elderly man, with grey beard and hair, wonderfully white even teeth, and palish hazel eyes, of an indefinite expression—an expression not quite as genial as his smile and manner); "but I have lived too long on the Continent to keep up many of our insular prejudices. If I talk to a countryman and like him, I want no other introduction. Now, where are you staying?"

Steven told him: also his name.

"Lawrence? dear me, one of the best fellows I ever knew was called Laurence. We were like brothers together in the Crimea—I have gone through my little bit of fighting in my day, you see! Your name is spelt?—ah, to be sure, with a 'w.' His, poor fellow, was with a 'u'; so there can be no relationship. Champs Elysées, you say? Best situation in Paris. Now we live in a most unfashionable quarter of the town—obliged, alas! to be economical. Kate, child, have you a card of mine about you?"

"I have not, papa," said the girl, in the same flute-like voice, but with a cold, distant manner, that contrasted singularly with the ultra-geniality of the man.

"Well—stay, let me see," searching within the pockets of his

shabby surtout in the buttonhole of which Steven, for the first time, remarked that he wore a little bit of red ribbon. "Yes, as luck will have it, I have got my card-case. Monsieur Barry, Mademoiselle Barry." And as he spoke he took a card from a well-worn leathern case, and handed it to Steven. "One hundred and five, Rue des Ursulines. You turn away to the left as you go from the Luxembourg, and cross the Boulevard de Sebastopol. Our lodging in on the third floor of a corner house immediately facing the Rue St. Jacques."

Steven put the card into his pocket, but volunteered no offer of calling; and then, the girl still remaining absolutely silent, the father went on again: "Our name, as you will remark, is Irish, but we have lived abroad until we are 'Monsieur' and 'Mademoiselle,' even among our English acquaintances. I may say, indeed, we look upon ourselves more as French than English now, don't we, Kate?"

"I believe so, papa."

"Most of our friends are foreigners—but really we live the quietest of lives. I take my girl (she and I are alone in the world, sir) to the theatre sometimes, and twice a week, Wednesday and Saturday, in our little way," said M. Barry, with bland humility, "we receive. Three or four friends come in, that is to say, to smoke a cigar, and play a rubber or a quiet round game. If such a humdrum way of spending your evening would be agreeable to you, we should be very glad—Katie, my dear, we should be very glad if Mr. Lawrence would give us the pleasure of his company at one of your grand receptions. Let me see, this is Wednesday; well if you have no better engagement, will you come round to our lodgings to-night?"

Mademoiselle Barry lifted her eyes for the second time to Steven's; the steady, dark-grey eyes that nullified whatever likeness the rest of her face bore to her father's. "Our grand receptions are not very much amusement to me," and as she said this she smiled; and Steven thought her more than handsome. "I don't smoke, and I don't play cards—"

"But you are very glad to find some one to talk to you while we old gentlemen doze over our rubber," interrupted M. Barry quickly, and rising from the bench as he spoke. "Mr. Lawrence, I don't

know what you say, but I find it too chilly to remain sitting. I suppose you have not time to take a stroll with us through the gardens?"

Mr. Lawrence had plenty of time, and the walk was lengthened out until long past noon; finally ended in their wandering for a couple of hours together through the gallery of the Luxembourg—hours in which Steven first learned to look at pictures with a dim sense of their being something more than painted canvas, framed and ranged on walls. He came home less wearied than he had ever felt after Parisian sight-seeing yet; and at ten o'clock that evening started, as soon as he had seen Dora into her carriage, towards the distant Rue des Ursulines, to attend Mademoiselle Barry's "reception."

"My husband, of his own free will, gone off to a party!" chatters Dot, in the intervals of her first quadrille with Clarendon Whyte; for Steven had told his little adventure in all integrity to his wife. "A party given by some charming people he picked up in the Luxembourg Gardens—an old gentleman friendly enough to ask strangers, whose name he doesn't know, to his house, and a daughter who seems to be a kind of walking guide-book, with wonderful grey eyes, and a voice like a nightingale; a much more fascinating person, evidently, than poor little me!"

Upon which Mr. Clarendon Whyte bends and whispers some bit of flattery, neither very brilliant nor very original, but which serves its purpose—sends a thrill of conscious vanity through the shallow, passionless heart of Steven's wife.

The Barrys' apartment was on the third floor of an hotel in one of the quietest quarters of the town, an apartment wanting in ormolu and velvet, but open and airy; more habitable far, thought Steven as he entered, than Dora's mousetrap entresol in the best situation in Paris. He was late: M. Barry, turning round from the card-table, rallied him as he came in about his fashionable hours; and such guests as were coming to the "reception" (four or five Freuchmen, none of them in evening dress) were already assembled. Mademoiselle Barry, alone at a little table by the fireside, was drawing. The lamp, placed close at her left hand, the methodical arrangement of her pencils and papers, the silence of the room, the faces of the men

around the card-table, gave Steven—he knew not why—an idea that the scene was an habitual one in the girl's life. He went up to her at once, and she put down her pencil, and bade him, with a friendly enough smile, take a chair at her side.

"I needn't interrupt you," said Steven, looking over her work. "Go on with your drawing. I should like to watch you."

"But I can't draw when I'm watched," said Mademoiselle Barry, "and I am so tired that I am glad to stop. After all you were forced to go through in the Luxembourg," she added, "I shouldn't think you wanted anything more in the shape of pictures to-day?"

"I 'went through' what gave me pleasure," said Steven, in his frank way. "This morning made me feel that, if I was ever so little better educated, I might get to like pictures—after a fashion of my own. Let me look at your drawing, please. Why, what is it done on—wood? I thought people drew on canvass or card-board, or tackle of that kind."

"People who draw for money draw on the tackle their masters bid them use," said Mademoiselle Barry, smiling a little smile to herself at the Englishman's ignorance. "I'm not a young lady artist, sir. I make money, good gold pieces of twenty francs, by my drawings. This sketch will appear publicly as one of the chief-d'œuvres of the '*Journal de la Rive gauche*' a week or two hence. You don't read the '*Journal de la Rive gauche*,' I suppose? It is, I must tell you, one of the poorest Paris papers of one sou. Well, if you did, you would recognize my drawing there—not by the sketch itself; all likeness to the original will be too thoroughly taken away in the cutting—but by the letters 'K. B.' Do you see them in the corner here?"

The scene which the drawing represented was of a character thoroughly suited to the paper for which it was destined: a young man reeling, pistol in hand, from a gambling room; glimpses of players around the table within: the outline of a female figure, her arms wildly extended, as if to clasp him, in the black night outside—a scene melodramatic in its conception, faulty in design, but drawn with exquisite fineness of touch, and not without originality and true artistic feeling in the expression and gestures of the principal actors.

"Why, this scene must surely have been taken from life," said Steven, when he had examined the block carefully. "I remember seeing one like it, or nearly like it, years ago in Sacramento. Surely," he went on, "a drawing such as this is worthy of a place in something better than——"

"A halfpenny Paris paper!" said Mademoiselle Barry, quickly. "No, indeed, it is not. There isn't such a thing, I hold, as underrated talent. We all find exactly the place in the world"—but as she said this she sighed—"exactly the place that we are most suited to fill. When first I began to draw—come and sit by the fire, please; so long as we talk low we may talk—when I first thought of drawing for money, that is to say about two years ago, I had a great opinion of myself. Because I could understand good pictures, and was fond of them, and had a pretty young-lady touch, I thought I was an artist!"

She smiled—the pensive flitting smile that became her delicate face so well. "If people have an overweening opinion of their own ability," she went on, as Steven remained silent, "let them try to make money by it. No test so sure, sir. I sent over my first sketches to the ——, well, to one of the best magazines in London. I knew nothing of English Magazines, but the clerk of the English library—we lived at Brussels then—told me it was one of the best and for two months heard nothing of them. Then I wrote to inquire. 'The sketches of K. B.,' I heard in three lines of reply, 'were wholly valueless to the ——'. It was feared they were mislaid. The risk of miscarriage was always, as K. B. probably knew, incurred by the sender.'"

"And after this?" asked Steven, interested for the first time in his life in any venture of art or literature.

"After this?" said Mademoiselle Barry, "we came to Paris, and I tried some of the first-class French papers, with the same success. At last an artist who looked over a sketch I was making in the Louvre one day told me I must draw on the wood with my own hand if I wanted to get money from the journals. I learnt wood-drawing—I mean, I taught myself how to do it—and, bit by bit, have risen to my present position. The '*Journal du Rive gauche*'

will give me twenty francs, at least, for this block, and twenty francs to me is a good deal."

Steven glanced round involuntarily at the card table, where gold pieces were circulating pretty freely through M. Barry's well-shaped hands in the course of the friendly round game.

"Oh, papa does not like my drawing for money," said the girl, as if she had guessed his thoughts. "He can't understand, perhaps you will not, the pleasure I have in possessing money that has been earned by myself, not by—not by my father putting it into my hand, you know!"

Just as she was speaking, the clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve. M. Barry looked round, and the girl rose in a second, and passed, with her graceful noiseless tread, into an adjoining room. She came back a minute or two later bearing a small tray of refreshments, set it down in silence on a table near the players, then returned to Steven. After standing for a few moments gazing down intently into the flickering wood-fire, "Mr. Lawrence," she said, not in a whisper, but in the kind of compressed voice more difficult than any whisper to overhear, "do you ever play cards? I hope not. It is a pleasant way of spending time, no doubt; my father is very fond of cards, as you see; but—but unless people are very lucky—and luck is so capricious! they generally end by losing an *awful* deal of money, I think."

"Like the hero in your sketch," answered Steven unsuspectingly. "Well, now, I'll tell you exactly how I feel about cards. I must either not play at all, or play too much. Cards themselves don't amuse me, but I'm ready, only too ready, to be carried away by the excitement of winning or losing, and, as I have no money to spare, the wisest thing is for me never to touch a card at all."

He spoke in a tone every word of which was loud enough to reach the ears of the players; but the players seemed all of them too engrossed to attend to anything beyond their game. At the end of another quarter of an hour. Steven and Mademoiselle Barry still talking together by the fire, there was a move, and one of the Frenchmen, with profuse apologies for breaking up the table so soon, rose to go. He was a little old man, dressed in a dark-blue uniform,

with a bit of yellow ribbon at his button hole, and was addressed by the remainder of the party as "Chevalier."

"And we all leave off much as we began," said M. Barry, carelessly turning over a small heap of gold pieces at his side. "You, Chevalier, a little bit better off than the rest of us. Twenty minutes past twelve only!" This, as the Chevalier, with a profound salutation to Mademoiselle Barry, left the room. "Kate, my dear, you are close to the clock—is it really only twenty minutes past twelve?"

"That is the time, papa."

"Well, then, what do you say, messieurs?" turning to his other guests. "Shall we go on for an hour or so more, or not?"

One of the men answered something in French, glancing as he spoke at Steven.

"Ah," said M. Barry, speaking in English, "it would be a bad compliment to ask our friend to join us so late in the evening. You wouldn't care to take the Chevalier's place for an hour, I suppose, Mr. Lawrence! We play a humdrum round game, just to while away the time, as you see, and you young men are all so accustomed to high play. Now, don't say 'yes' out of good nature!"

Steven hesitated.

"Come and have a glass of wine before we begin, at all events," said M. Barry, rising. "Katie, my love, come to the table and have some wine. You look tired."

The girl obeyed him instantly, as she always obliged him in everything: drank a glass of claret, ate some fruit, then, in her pretty quiet way, stood chatting to the three or four dingy Frenchmen of whom her "reception" consisted, while M. Barry talked, with ever-increasing friendliness of manner, to Steven. "You don't care to take a hand, I see," he remarked at last. "Be frank—'twill only be for an hour; but I don't like in my own house to break up the game."

"Well, if I am really wanted, I'll play," said Steven, hesitatingly; but as he spoke he approached the card-table; "that is to say, if I understand the game you are playing at."

"We play lansquenet," said one of the Frenchmen, in broken English. "Quite easy play—you learn him in tree minute. See, I

play ze valet," taking up a pack of cards to further his explanation, "and ze dame. Your money is for ze dame. I turn, turn, turn—là ! You gain." Extending the fingers of both hands, as if to show by pantomime the ease with which he would be despoiled of his money by the Englishman's superior luck.

"Ah, I believe I know something about it," said Steven, taking the Chevalier's vacant chair : he had played lansquenet a good many dozen times at Haverstock. "Only in England we call it lansquenette."

"Lansquenet,—lansquenette,—mais c'est la même chose," cried M. Barry, who seldom seemed to remember whether he was speaking English or French. "The stupidest game in the world, as a game ;" confidentially this to Steven ; "but you never can get Frenchmen to play at anything else, except baccarat. Whist is too slow for them ; loo they detest." Then, turning to the other players, all of whom had now resumed their places, M. Barry introduced his guests to each other formally, and the little round game went on.

Mademoiselle Barry returned to the fireside, seated herself in an arm-chair, with her back to the players, and never looked round until an hour, or an hour and a half later, when the game broke up. The moment the men rose from the table the French habitués of the house bowed themselves away, and Steven, coming up to Mademoiselle Barry, began to wish her good-night.

"No, no, no, Lawrence !" cried M. Barry, running back from the door, where he had been seeing his friends out, and putting his hand on Steven's arm. "Stop, and have half an hour's chat and a friendly cigar with me. You haven't been very much bored with our quiet evening, I hope ? Then you must come next Saturday—come as long as you are in Paris. You lost a little I'm afraid ?"

"On the contrary," said Steven ; "I won four or five pounds, at least."

"Did you, indeed ? I thought de Vitrou won—as much, that is to say, as was lost. We play, as you see, very moderately. I scarcely remember winning or losing more than a couple of hundred francs myself in one evening, for months past."

Mademoiselle Barry looked up quickly at her father's face. "Ah,"

said M. Barry, without giving her time to speak, "my daughter thinks two hundred francs a frightfully heavy sum, poor little Katie ! and so it is, to us. She doesn't remember a mother's care, Lawrence. From the time she was so high, she has managed—tried, rather, to manage—my nomadic housekeeping for me. A life spent in great continental cities without mother or sister, is a terribly lonely one for a girl ; but as much as I can, I make myself her companion."

He put his arm tenderly round her thin little figure, and drew her to his side. "And how have you passed your evening, child ? Wearied with the sight of old gentlemen and card-playing, as usual ?"

"I wasn't wearied at all while Mr. Lawrence talked to me," answered the girl, with perfect frankness. "As soon as he touched the cards I was alone again, and I never feel very weary when I am alone."

"As soon as a man touches cards you look upon him as lost, Katie, don't you ?" said M. Barry. "It is a symptom of old-fogyism quite unpardonable in your sight. Nothing really pleases my little girl, sir, but wandering through churches and picture-galleries of a morning, and working herself blind, as you have seen, over her wood-drawing of an evening. Her only dissipation, poor child, is the theatre. We are going there to-morrow night, by-the-bye, to hear this new thing they are bringing out at the Opéra Comique. You have heard it, of course ?"

It would be impossible for me to tell you what I have heard," said Steven ; "I have been taken, I know, to most of the theatres in Paris, but——"

"If one doesn't care for music, what a toil of pleasure it is," interrupted M. Barry ; "especially if you have not a thorough knowledge of the language. Now, I was just going to propose that you should accompany us to-morrow. We go in a very humble fashion—walk to the theatre, my daughter in her morning-dress, take our places in an obscure part of the house, and when we have had enough, come away. Such a way of passing the evening would be martyrdom to you, no doubt ?"

"On the contrary," answered Steven, "it is the only way in which, if I could choose, I should ever go to the theatre myself."

"Then you had better come with us, I think," said *Mademoiselle Barry*, raising her eyes for a moment to his face.

And this was how Steven's apprenticeship to *lansquenet* and *baccarat* was brought about.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

MONSIEUR VALENTIN'S SKETCH.

"You can't deny, my dear Steven, that you are always with these people. I hear it from everybody. You have been seen with them in all sorts of places : picture-galleries, churches, theatres even, and by your own account you spend your evenings at their house. Now, I have no small jealousy. No," said *Dot*, loftily, "my maxim is perfect confidence, perfect freedom in married life ; but what I say is, a husband who amuses himself as you do has no right—no right, Steven, to interfere with his wife in any way."

"And I," answered Steven, "differ from you entirely. I spend my mornings in walking about with the *Barrys*. I go there sometimes of an evening, and shall continue to do so during the short time we stay in Paris. And I don't choose you to go to this masked ball. It's the first thing I have forbidden you to do yet, *Dora*, and I insist upon your obeying me."

"Insist ? Because of the expense, or what you believe will be the expense, I conclude ?"

"On the contrary," answered Steven, "expense is a subject I have long ceased to think about as far as you are concerned."

"As far as I am concerned !" cried *Mrs. Lawrence*, firing. "I like that. I lose all the money at *baccarat* and *écarté*, I suppose ? I am pointed out, by half Paris, as the associate of a set of notorious, disreputable card-sharpers."

"Not card-sharpers !" said Steven, calmly. "I don't think the people you spend your time with particularly reputable ; but I know no reason why they should be accounted card-sharpers."

"A great deal more than can be said for your companions !" cried

Dot, wisely declining the defence of her own friends. "I speak much more in sorrow than in anger, Steven, and I think it my positive duty to tell you that M. Barry is looked upon among the English as a common blackleg. His accomplice—one of his accomplices, rather—is an old man they call the chevalier. The chevalier, and three or four other Frenchmen of the same stamp, play at his house twice a week—you see, I have heard all about it—nominally winning and losing money among themselves; and then, of course, when they get any poor simpleton well into the net, they divide the spoils. There are Englishmen now in Paris who remember Barry in Florence, in Monaco, in Brussels. He lives by his wits, by his dexterous fingers, I should say: just remains in a place until he has plucked a sufficient number of pigeons, or until the police are down upon him, and then goes away, nobody knows where, his daughter, if she is his daughter, with him."

Steven had kept his temper admirably hitherto; but at his wife's last words the blood rose in an angry flush across his face. "M. Barry may or may not be what you say, Dora. Until such accusations are brought openly against a man I, for my part, would never think of listening to them behind his back. As for Mademoiselle Barry——"

"As for Mademoiselle Barry? Pray, don't hesitate, my dear!"

"She is the first quiet, decent woman it has been my chance to come across in Paris," said Steven, with deliberation; "and I have found rest and pleasure in her society. I'm not, I never shall be, up to the mark of the world you like to live in, Dora. The truth must be told some day between us! You took me to your balls, and I saw women dressed—that I should use the word—as no honest man in my class of life would ever see his wife or sister dress: with painted lips and cheeks, with dishevelled hair, nakedness on their shoulders, immodesty in their eyes——"

"Steven!"

"And I felt a pang—well, you'd never understand *what* I felt, child, on first seeing you among them. Ridiculous, quite! I know all you would say. A woman of the world must dress and dance, and be like others. So you told me, Dora, you remember?"

"I do, sir ; and I remember you told me that you were ignorant—you confessed it then—ignorant of the ways of civilized people, and that you would not seek to make me adopt your absurd old-fashioned notions."

"I don't ask you to adopt them now. You have had freedom enough, God knows !" said Steven, "and have been to balls enough, and spent money, and lived fast enough in every way, without my opposing you. At this masked ball I make a stand. You shall not go to it ! The matter is settled." And he rose, and began searching about for his hat among the heaps of silk and velvet that, as usual, filled up every chair and table of the small room.

"Oh, but the matter is not settled," cried Dot. "You needn't take up you hat : your *friends* must wait for you to-day. After what you have said—the cruel, the infamous things you have said of my acquaintances ! women received—yes, received by the world, Steven, I choose to speak openly, too. This Mademoiselle Barry, who you say is the first decent person you have spoken to in Paris, is looked upon by every one simply as an accomplice of the man's. How did they first get to know you ? Would any respectable man introduce his daughter to an utter stranger, picked up in the Luxembourg Gardens ? I don't—I *can't* stoop to suspecting you of really caring for such society ; but I do say, that in appearing openly with a person like Mademoiselle Barry you outrage public opinion and me."

Then Steven turned, and looked down full on his wife's face—the small face smaller than ever after its manifold midnight vigils, worn and sickly-hued now that no rouge concealed it ! And all the manliness of his nature forbade him, as it had forbidden him that night of her first victory at Ashcot, to contend with a thing so weak. "Dora, my dear, you speak like a child. I was wrong to be vexed with you. You only repeated what some empty-headed fool has told you of Mademoiselle Barry. She an accomplice ! she one of a band of card-sharpers ! I have committed an outrage on public opinion by being seen with her !" Steven laughed aloud. "A little simple-minded girl, who lets me walk beside her through these galleries and show-places, and teaches me—I want it bad enough—

who lived here, and who died there, and what this picture means, and the rest of it."

"And lansquenet and écarté of an evening? Is that another branch of Mademoiselle Barry's tuition!"

"Mademoiselle Barry detests cards," said Steven, shortly, "If I had followed her advice I should never have touched a card in her father's house. The moment play begins she turns her back upon us, sits down to her drawing—I've told you before how she works at those blocks of hers—and never looks round again until the table breaks up."

"I see,—*rôle d'ingénue*,—exactly what I was told. Steven, to come from sentiment to fact, how many good solid napoleons have you lost since you made the acquaintance of your friend M. Barry, and his intellectual, simple-minded daughter?"

Steven did not at once reply.

"You can answer at least," cried Dot. "The question is a fair one, I'm sure! How much of our money has already made its way into the Barrys' pockets?"

"Well, on the whole," said Steven, "I believe I must have lost about thirty pounds. Till three days ago I had won—won considerably, but on Saturday night the luck certainly went dead against me. So you see, my dear, I have no secrets. I tell you everything!" And he stooped and drew her kindly (not kissing her: the battalions of hair-pins, the powders, the unguents which surrounded Dora of a morning did not encourage these old-fashioned amenities of domestic life) to his side.

"Does Mademoiselle Barry know you are a married man, Steven?"

"I—I suppose so," he answered. "I have never thought it necessary to talk to the Barrys about my own affairs."

"And you tell me, on your very honour, you are not a bit . . . Oh! Steven, you are not a bit in love with her?"

"I don't think you ought to ask me such a question, Dora."

"But I do ask it! and I do expect you to give me an answer, sir!"

"Well, then, as you will have it, poor little Mademoiselle Barry is the last woman I should ever think of in that kind of way, even if I could 'fall in love,' as you call it, with anybody now!"

"Am I to take that as a personal compliment, I wonder?"

"Take it as the plain truth, child. You know well enough I never try to pay you compliments."

She put one small hand under her husband's arm, clasped it with the other, and so stood, meditative, for some moments. "How glad I am we have had all this out!" she cried at last. "How foolish I was not to speak before! You have quite satisfied me about these poor, virtuous, slandered Barrys (only don't lose any more thirty pounds than you can help, for the future, my big goose), and—ah, Steven, you *can't* refuse me now about this ball! Every one is going," went on Dot, not giving him time to speak, "Grizelda Long, Lady B——, all the people I know. You can come yourself to mount dragon over me, if you will, dear! It will be almost my last—think of that! my last party in Paris. Don't refuse me."

"Don't force me to refuse you," said Steven. "You know very well what I have said already. Don't force me to repeat it."

"Steven," cried Dot, both hands clasped round his arm, and looking up intreatingly into his face; "if you won't let me accept this invitation, at least give me your reasons for declining it? You have never said a word about my going to other balls; why mustn't I go to this? How can a masked ball—a fancy ball rather; half the people won't wear masks—be worse than any other? Can a dress of Louis Quinze or of the First Empire," said Dot, with unconscious irony, "be less decorous than one of the present day?"

"Hardly, I must admit," answered Steven. "Still, some of these costumes do outrival even what I saw in your Parisian ball-rooms!" And he pointed to a dozen or so of milliners' pictures that were lying in a heap beside Dora's work-case on the table.

"And you have been judging of a *bal costumé* by these ridiculous engravings?" cried Mrs. Lawrence. "A set of old-fashioned stupidities that some one, Grizelda Long I think, left here yesterday! No doubt there are all sorts of outrageous costumes to be found among them—theatrical costumes, who knows? But do you *think* I would appear in one of them, in anything that was not the perfection of good taste? Now, Steven, I don't argue, I don't wish to oppose you, but will you, just to please me, let me show you the little dress *that*, if you did relent, and if I did go, I would wear?"

She made him, whether he would or no, sit down again ; disappeared for a minute into her bedroom ; then returned, holding something out of sight behind her, came and knelt down at his feet.

"The ball, as you know, my dear Steven, is given by Lady Sarah Adair."

"I know," said Steven. "That fact alone sets me against it. Why doesn't Lady Sarah Adair live with her husband?"

"Because he is a monster !" answered Dora, promptly. "A horrible half-witted creature (she only married him for his money, poor girl !) And he beats her—yes, Steven, beats her, and throws her downstairs when he is not sober, and the doctors sent the Lord Chancellor a certificate to say her life would be endangered by remaining with him, and——"

"And so she forgets her sorrows by living alone in Paris, and giving masked balls !" interrupted Steven.

"She lives well thought of by every one ; has an old lady—it is her aunt, or his aunt ? well, some one's aunt—as chaperon ; and invites all kinds of artists and celebrities, quite the sort of society you would like, to her house. To walk through this ball, they say, will be like walking through a gallery of historical portraits. There are to be groups illustrative of the different periods, each person dressed by artists for the part to which he is best suited. Now—now shall I show you my costume, Steven ? It has been designed by a celebrated painter who knows me by sight, and Lady Sarah will be in despair at losing me. Not another full-grown person in Paris could fill the character, they say, but me. Will you see it ?"

"Show me anything you choose, my dear."

"Well here, then !" Dot produced a coloured engraving. "Here I must tell you, is the model for Marie de Medicis. What do you think of it !" and she leaned across still, holding something concealed in her left hand, to point out the beauties of the costume to Steven's ignorant eyes. "A crimson velvet stomacher, embroidered with pearls, you see ; pearls on the throat and wrists ; white silk train, all worked in richest crimson and gold."

"I see," said Steven ; "a tawdry, strolling-actor affair to my

taste, but suited, no doubt, to a woman about as tall as I am, and stout in proportion."

"Exactly, exactly!" cried Dot; "that dress is for Lady Sarah herself, who, as you know, poor dear, is one of the unwidiest women in Paris. Lady Sarah is to be Marie de Medicis, and for me—ah, Steven—for me is reserved the sweetest, the most piquant little dress of the ball, Marie de Medicis' page or train-bearer. Saying which she produced another picture, an artist's sketch this, artistically coloured, and bearing a strong likeness to herself in the face; and put it, after a slight preliminary show of hesitation, into Steven's hand.

"Doublet of sky-blue silk, you see, dearest; little hanging cloak of blue velvet; velvet cap; white plume; tiny rapier in the belt; white satin—great heavens, Steven!" cried Dot, starting away as she chanced to look from the picture to her husband's face, "what is the matter with you?"

"You—you want to go in this dress to a ball?" said Steven, each word coming from his lips with dry measured emphasis. "You could endure to have men's eyes upon you—you, a married woman, thirty years of age—in a dress like this?"

"I think before you insult me in that way you should remember what you are saying!" But, as she spoke, Dot rose to her feet, and shrank away from him, frightened. "People much better than us go to balls in page-costume. Lady Alicia Hall went in that same character last year, and—and it's very ungenerous in you, Steven, to taunt me about my age. The costume is looked upon by everybody as the perfection of good taste, and M. Valentin, one of the most rising artists in Paris, drew it expressly to suit me."

"Did he?" was Steven's answer. "Then you can write word to Lady Sarah Adair at once, that you will not attend her ball. Say, if you want an excuse, that you believe your husband will have taken you home to his farm before the day arrives. Monsieur Valentin's sketch I treat—as you ought to have done when it was first put into your hands!" And Steven tore the sketch across into six, eight pieces; then, deliberately, without passion, laid the fragments down in a little pile upon the table.

Dora stood for a minute horror struck, aghast ; then she burst out into a flood of tears. " I would rather, much, you had struck me !" she cried, her great dark eyes flaming out from her small face. " If you had kept me from the ball I should at least have had the picture of my toilette to look at ! could have made believe to myself, almost, when I am back in your horrid Ashcot, that I had worn it. It was drawn for me—it was my portrait—half Paris knows Monsieur Valentin drew it for me. O, I hate you—I hate you !"

She set her teeth ; she stamped with her little foot. An injustice regarding millinery had, as you have seen, been the unpardonable wrong done her in her youth. Millinery still was the one human interest that could wring genuine feeling, genuine passion, from what shallow depths she possessed of soul. " You are big and strong, and you think, now you have me in your power, you can treat me—as you treated that wretched man, whom you turned out of your house at Clithero to starve ! But I'm not afraid of you ! I'll write and tell Uncle Frank of your violence. What right had you to destroy my poor little picture ! my own property, drawn on purpose for me, and coloured so bright and pretty, and—and real gold dust on the hair !" said Dot, with choking voice.

" I had the best right in the world to destroy it," answered Steven. " The right of a husband who does not choose that his wife should forget her own self-respect, or to see her represented in a dress which, I believe, many a common play-actress would have the decency to blush for having worn. Write to your uncle, child : describe the dress you wanted to appear in at a ball of two hundred people, and tell him how I served the model of it. I am not ashamed of what I've done." And once more Steven took up his hat and moved across to the door.

" And neither—in spite of all those grand declamations—am I ashamed !" cried Dora, watching him with flashing eyes. " If other women of good position, and good birth, and everything, had not appeared in page-costume, of course I should never have thought of it ; but they have—Lady Alicia Hall wore this very dress—and I'm not ashamed, and I don't take your ultimatum as final. Suppose, I say, that I *choose* to go to this fancy-ball ?"

"I will suppose nothing of the kind. You are talking nonsense," said Steven, still not unkindly ; still in a voice not very different to that in which he might have addressed a wilful, reasonless child.

"Nonsense, am I ? That remains to be seen. You are not in Central America now, remember, but in civilized Europe, and I'm your wife, sir—not your squaw, your slave—and a free agent ! If I say that I will stay in Paris, that I will go to Lady Sarah's ball—what then !"

"Why then," said Steven laconically, you might stay here, as far as I'm concerned, for good. Ashcot may be dull and dreary—I'm afraid it is so to you, Dora—but the women who have lived there have been honest wives, thank God ! Ashcot would be no place for a lady who had gone in male attire, and against her husband's wishes to a Parisian masquerade."

As he spoke, Dot had watched him narrowly, and in her inmost heart—a heart wholly frivolous ; untainted, as yet, by worse than frivolity—she felt that she respected him. "We'll talk no more of this," she said, turning shortly away. "I have not been ungenerous to you. I have not blamed you, even, as the world blames you, for your intimacy with the Barrys ; but of course, power is in your hands, and you use it. Thank heaven the discussion is over !"

"Amen !" said Steven, drily, and left her.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

ON THE BRINK OF AVERNUS.

HE had scarcely quitted the nouse ten minutes when a fiacre, containing two English travellers, drove up before the door.

"The Honourable Augustus Dynevor was not fastidious as to the quality of air he breathed," remarked the Squire, when he and Katharine, a minute later, had made their way up the dark, unsavoury landing of the entresol. "The direction you can send your friends in England is the best thing about the house, I should say ; but show, not comfort, is just what poor Dot would care for ! Now let

me ask for her, Kate. I know the ways of these French servants, and their 'Madam paw visible,' better than you do."

Thereupon, the Squire gave a long ring at the entresol bell; and when Dora's femme de ménage: old and mœnad-like, as only a Parisian charwoman can be: answered it, planted his umbrella well within the door, as an advance-guard, before giving her time to speak. "Madame est aller maisong? Oh no, of course not. Kate, my dear, go in—don't believe a word of it—French women *never* tell the truth."

"Mais, Monsieur—Madame est souffrante! Madame ne reçoit jamais le matin!" expostulated the poor mœnad, shrilly. "Mademoiselle Aglaë!" shriller still; "venez donc parler à ces Messieurs!"

Mademoiselle Aglaë was a large-eyed, coffee-hued young person, with a waist of eighteen inches, and green ribbons coquettishly set in glossy black hair—Dora's workwoman, lady's maid, and confidante at thirty sous a day. She came forward with the grimace that amongst Frenchwomen of her class passes for a smile, and made a little reverence to the Squire. "Madame Laurent est désolée, Monsieur et Madame, mais——"

"Mais we are going to see her," said Mr. Hilliard, marching straight past Mademoiselle Aglaë, and knocking at the first door he saw with the head of his umbrella. "Dora, my dear!" in his cheery English voice. "Dora!" still louder, "we've travelled all the way from Kent to pay you a morning visit, and we mean to come in whether you're visible, or desolate, or not."

And now Aglaë and the mœnad beheld a sight such as their black eyes never beheld before: Madame in her not-too-dainty dressing-gown—Madame, her hair in pins, slippers, unrouged, suddenly "visible," and throwing her arms round the neck, first of one, then the other, of these untimely English visitors.

"Dear Uncle Frank—Kate; and you never wrote to tell me! Aglaë, c'est ma cousine—ma sœur. Viens donc voir si Mademoiselle est gentille! Steven hasn't been gone ten minutes; you must have passed him close to the house. We have very little room, Uncle Frank," running before him into the salon;—"our apartment is a modest one—a nutshell and I'm obliged to do my needlework in the drawing-room, but I *think* I can find you a chair."

The Squire seated himself gingerly on the edge of one of the crimson velvet arm-chairs, from which Dora had first to sweep away a whole avalanche of finery, and looked about the room in a sort of wonder. Patterns, women's work-tools, a toilette-glass on the table ; shreds and ribbons on the floor ; oceans of billowy white blonde and muslin everywhere. "And is this your sitting-room !" he cried. "And do you mean to tell me you find room for that big husband of yours among all this stock of tulle ! Have you set up a milliner's shop, Miss Dora, or what ?"

Dora, her arm round Katharine's waist, answered that she had not set up a milliner's shop, though no one, alas ! as Uncle Frank knew, could be better suited to do so than herself. She had made a good many kind friends in Paris, fortunately for her ! and her friends asked her out sometimes, and such modest toilettes as she required (the Squire thought of the bills that had been sent to him for Mrs. Lawrence's wedding outfit) she prepared herself. Steven was so seldom at home, and there was so little light on the other side of the house, that she was glad to use her drawing-room to work in of a morning.

"And are you getting stronger, Dot !" said Katharine, looking down steadily at her cousin's face. "You are thin, I am afraid. You don't look as if the air of Paris had done you all the good we expected."

"I shall be better now you have come," cried Dot affectionately. "I—well, in spite of the kindness of my friends, I must confess I *have* felt a very little lonely of late ! Where are you staying ? Hôtel Rivoli ; ah, how delightful ! we can see each other all day long. I have a carriage by the month—yes, Uncle Frank it sounds extravagant ; but, as I say to Steven, surely it is better to pay the stable-keeper than the physician ! and I can take you about, dear Kate, and show you Paris. I know a great many people. I can get you invitations for every night of your life, if you choose."

Katharine hesitated, then looked down at the floor. The Squire spoke out boldly. "We have not come to Paris for ball-going, Dot, thank you, and—and we have heard already that you have a numerous acquaintance. 'Tis to be hoped you look well into the charac-

ter of your friends," he added ; for Mr. Hilliard was a man who seldom beat long about the bush in anything he had got to say. "English people don't live about on the Continent, as a rule, unless they have very good reasons for not stopping at home, and you know you are fond of pleasure, and if Lawrence, as we hear, does not go with you—" the Squire shook his head, and looked altogether as though he had very poor opinion of the results to which little Mrs. Dora's Parisian friends and their entertainments were likely to lead.

Dot shot a keen glance, first at her uncle's face, then at Katharine's. What had they heard ? What was the meaning of this sudden flight to Paris in the middle of the hunting season ! Were they here as Steven's allies or hers ? Was her chance of wearing the blue and silver heightened, in fine, or lessened by their advent ?

"I know the nicest people in Paris, Uncle Frank. You cannot have heard a word against any friend of mine. Miss Long—you remember, my bridesmaid, Grizelda Long ? well, she introduced me to dear little Lady B——, and through her a great many people have called on me, and——"

"And Lawrence ?" interrupted the Squire. "Are his friends the nicest people in Paris, too ?"

"You will put that question to himself, please," said Dot dropping her eyelids. "I can tell you nothing whatever about Steven's friends. He is out all day ; I scarcely see him except at meals."

"Well," said the Squire, looking around him anew, "if you have as many yards of muslin about always as you have to-day, I shouldn't say there was much room for him at home. What time is it now ? Half-past eleven. You have become very fashionable in your hours, Dot—got into the slovenly French habit of dressing-gowns too. A young wife like you ought to be as neat and fresh when she sits down to breakfast with her husband as at any other hour of the day. What do you say, Kate ?"

"That every one knows their own failings best—don't you, Kate ?" interposed Mrs. Lawrence. "If I was strong I would be up with the lark—out in the fresh air every morning of my life, but I'm not strong," an opportune short hollow cough interrupted her. "I can

take nothing till eleven, and then only a cup of chocolate, and Steven poor fellow, has such an appetite ! So we find it better for each of us to keep to our own hours. I assure you I manage our house-keeping very economically. The old creature who let you in constitutes our whole establishment, and she is on board wages, and our dinner is sent from a restaurant, and—and we have only two meals a day !” added Dot with touching candour.

“And if you have a grain of sense between you, will be thankful to get back to your own comfortable home,” said the Squire rising to his feet. “The air of this room isn’t good for human beings, Dora ! I don’t like your looks at all, and I shall tell your husband so. You have had quite enough of Paris, in my opinion, and had much better give up a little of your term, and come back with Kate and me when we go !”

A conscious blush rose over Dot’s face. “I—I should be ready to go to-morrow,” she cried, “as far as I am concerned ; but then Steven——”

“Oh, leave Steven to me,” said Mr. Hilliard. “I’ll never believe Lawrence can have got so fond of town-life as to want to stay, with you ready to return. Where is he likely to be found ? I might stroll out and take a look after him while you two girls have your talk together about dressmakers and furbelows.”

“Kate must stop with me for the day,” cried Mrs. Lawrence, possessing herself of Katharine’s hand. “I shall give up all other engagements, all other friends, now that she has come ! Leave Kate with me, dear Uncle Frank, and don’t expect to see anything more of her till six o’clock at the earliest.”

“And where shall I find Lawrence ? at Galignani’s, or where ?”

“I—I never heard of Steven going to Galignani’s,” cried Dot, her eyelids lowered again. “If I speak the truth, I have not the slightest idea where to tell you to look for him.”

So the Squire went out, to while away the time as best he might by watching such carriages and horses as at this hour of the day were to be seen ; comparing them, with tranquil satisfaction, in his mind’s eye with the horses and carriages in London ; and Katharine and Steven’s wife were left alone to have their talk about fashions and furbelows.

"Dearest Katharine!" cried Mrs. Lawrence, with effusion the moment Mr. Hilliard had gone. "You could not have come at a more welcome time. I have so much to tell you—my heart is so full—(Aglæ, Aglæ, viens donc!" the parenthesis in Dot's voluble Parisian French. "Take the grenadine into my room; there is light enough close under the window, and finish the fluting thyself, not a hair's-breadth deeper than I have marked, my daughter, and the blonde just to show on the top). I beg your pardon, Katharine, dear, but I'm obliged to make my dresses at home, and this poor faithful girl is invaluable to me. Oh, Kate, Kate! what an empty farce life seems at times! What—*what* are blondes and laces with an unsatisfied aching heart?"

She threw herself down wearily in the same chair where Steven had sat when he looked at M. Valentin's sketch—the torn shreds of paper close beside her on the table—and seemed likely to weep. And all Miss Fane's sympathies froze on the spot. Compassionate, generous, though she was by nature, Katherine, at this moment, was a woman prepared to sit in judgment upon a faulty sister; and the rice-powdered cheeks, the hair-pinned head, the tawdry apartment, the eagerness about blondes and fluting were all taken by her at truest valuation. Valuation, I need scarcely say, wholly unfavourable to any impending scene of contrition or of sentiment.

"If life seems a farce, it's because we make it one," she said, bluntly. "You and I, and the rest of us, Dora. If you are really suffering, really sick at heart, why go to these parties? Why labour, above all, at the rehearsal, if acting in the play itself gives you no pleasure?"

"Because one never finds the exact point at which to stop; because one thinks every day will bring something better worth living for than the last; because—oh, Kate! don't lecture me? Uncle Frank has done that. If you knew all, you would pity, much more than you would blame me."

"I blame no one, and I do pity you—you, and Steven still more," cried Katharine, "in the life that you are leading. Dot, by-the-bye, how is it you have never mentioned Mr. Clarendon Whyte in any of your letters to me?"

Mrs. Lawrence stooped her face down over the little heap of torn

paper upon the table. The action naturally enough, brought something more of colour into her white cheeks. "Did I not mention Mr. Clarendon Whyte? I can hardly think that—I'm sure I meet him often enough! Unless I had mentioned him, how did you know he was in Paris?"

"I have heard of his being here from two different sources," said Katharine, severely. "I have also heard—but that I won't believe until you tell me it is so—that he is seen a great deal too often at Mrs. Lawrence's side."

Dot burst into a thoroughly unconcerned laugh. "My poor, dear Katharine! what airs of tragedy do we all give ourselves to-day! First Uncle Frank (no, first the master of the house—I must tell you another time about the scene we have had), then me, then you. 'Mr. Whyte seen too often at Mrs. Lawrence's side!' Kate, you know me pretty well. Was I, in my most foolish days, a person to be unduly carried away by sentiment? Now that I am married, am I likely, any more than Mrs. Dering—I can say nothing stronger!—to compromise myself, or my husband, because Mr. Clarendon Whyte wears good gloves, and happens to be an excellent waltzer?"

"Compromise! no, but——"

"But allow poor Mr. Whyte to take me to and from my carriage, and give me bouquets, for which he has my spare dances in return, and do commissions for me, and escort me and my friends to the theatre when my husband is too lazy to go? Certainly, Katharine dear, I do allow all this. Why not?"

The one genuine gift with which Nature had endowed Dot was the gift of mimicry. She had made her little speech, her self-defence, in Mrs. Dering's voice, with Mrs. Dering's elevation of eyebrow; concluding it by the half-yawn wherewith Mrs. Dering was wont to dismiss any subject of thorough insignificance.

In spite of herself Katharine was obliged to laugh. "Arabella has been a great deal longer married, a great deal more in the world than you, Dot, and besides——"

"General Dering is in a very different position to Steven Lawrence of Ashcot, and so his wife may allow herself greater freedom of action *Is that what you would say, my dear?*"

"To a certain extent, yes. In the early days of her marriage Arabella lived much more quietly than she does now, and certainly never went out without her husband. And Steven is *not* General Dering, nor Paris London !" cried Katharine, with more energy than logic ; "and I think Grizelda Long a bad companion for you, and Clarendon Whyte a worse, and you shall give up the remainder of your term—papa is quite right ; what good is Paris doing you ?—and come back home when we do. Yes, Dot, I say you shall."

Something admirably like real emotion made Dora's eyes soften. "If Steven would speak like that ! If Steven would show genuine affectionate interest in me what a different woman I should be ! But he does not."

"Then don't tell me anything about it," cried Katharine, stoutly. "I would rather not hear one word from you against your husband, please. I can't—I will never believe that it is by Steven's wish you lead this wretched life apart that you are now doing."

Dora bent down her face once more, and carefully collected together every minutest morsel of M. Valentin's sketch. "Kate," she said, after a minute, fitting in piece after piece like a dissecting puzzle as she spoke, "your friendship for Steven, much as I admire it, should not, I think, make you unjust to Steven's wife. We do lead a life apart—a wretched life, if you choose, for bride and bridegroom of yesterday—and why ?"

"Steven never cared for town amusements, or the habits of a town-life. When you first wrote, you used to tell me how much enjoyment he got out of the parties to which you took him !"

"Exactly. He got no more enjoyment out of parties than I did out of the lonely Ashcot days when I sat listening to the kitchen-clock, and he hunted. Still, I bore those days remember ! It was Steven who separated himself from me, not I from him."

Miss Fane coloured, and was silent.

"Yes, I bore those wretched days," went on Dot, "and Steven, for the very short time I required such a sacrifice of him, might have borne with my balls and parties, my frivolities, call them by what name you like ! He has not done so. He has chosen to let me go into the world by myself ; has chosen his own associates, his own life.

Whatever you, Katharine Fane, may think, the world has formed a pretty definite opinion as to which has the most grounds for complaint,—Steven or I."

"And how do you know what the world says?" cried Katharine, warmly. "Is there a man or woman living whom you would suffer to talk to you about your husband's demerits?"

"My dear Kate, I am not romantic! Always remember that. I am not romantic, and am quite capable of looking at my husband's conduct without bias. He married me—not for love! and in the very first days of our marriage we lived a life apart. Do you remember my telling you how I would watch him in Paris before we had been married a week, watch him and feel that, if he once broke loose, he was a man to commit any act of desperation or folly imaginable? Well, he *has* broken loose! Voilà! he *has* broken loose; and a woman who has lived as many years as I have doesn't need to be told what must be thought of him by the world. Stay a few days in Paris; talk to your friend George Gordon—of all men the last to be prejudiced in my favour—and see if you will defend Steven as enthusiastically then."

"I don't defend him!" said Katharine. "I defend no one. I only say I am certain Steven is not to blame——"

"And that I am!" interrupted Dot. "A la bonne heure, Katharine! Some day if I come to worse trouble than now, 'don't defend' me as you 'don't defend' Steven; that is all."

"I shall try always to be just," said Katharine, inflexibly. "It was by your wish that Steven came to Paris. It was by your wish, even according to your own accounts, that you first forced him to balls and parties——"

"And it is by my wish that Steven lives, shows himself openly to the world at Mademoiselle Barry's side," said Dora, playing out this her winning card, with quiet emphasis. "Well, as you choose. What use is there for me to contradict you?"

"At . . . at Mademoiselle Barry's side?" stammered Katharine. "Who is Mademoiselle Barry? I don't understand—I never heard——"

"You never heard—I never told you—that Steven had found amusements, formed acquaintance of his own?"

"I heard he played too high at cards," said poor Katharine in an altered voice : "that he was among a dangerous set of men—it was a little for this that we came to Paris—I may tell you now, Dora ! Papa thought it would be well for him to speak to Steven himself ; speak to him and save him, if there was time, from still further folly."

Save Steven from folly ! These good simple people had come on no other errand, then, than this ! What a load seemed lifted from little Mrs. Lawrence's spirit ! She saw herself in the blue and silver (Steven by some adroit coup de main conjured away out of Paris) before a crowd of two hundred admiring spectators yet !

"Don't, please, look so desperately concerned, my dear Katharine ! I know quite well that such things happen daily in the world, that a wife would only be laughed at for taking her husband's neglect too deeply to heart ! If Steven observed the bienséances I would be silent ; but for him to be seen in picture-galleries, in the public walks at theatres (the theatres he won't go to with me !) in the society of such people—it is too much, too much !" cried Dot, shaking her little head, and looking pathetically indignant.

"And who is Mademoiselle Barry !" asked Katharine, presently, with downcast, averted face, with trembling lips.

"Mademoiselle Barry is the daughter of M. Dermot Barry, an Irish gentleman living upon his wits, and is precisely the most dangerous kind of woman imaginable for a man as unsuspicious as Steven to fall in with. I know the whole story of his acquaintance with her : he has told it me himself, poor fellow !" Dot never strayed further than she could actually help from the truth. "An acquaintance made without introduction in the Luxembourg Gardens, the father at her side, and beginning with talk about pictures, and palaces, and the French Revolution, and I know not what besides ; for Mademoiselle Barry's strong point, I must tell you, is intellect."

"Oh, go on, go on !" cried Katharine "if indeed it is a history that you should tell or I listen to."

"It is a history that you *must* listen to if you mean to stay a week in Paris," said Mrs. Lawrence, calmly ; "and few people, I fancy, will

tell it you in language so favourable to Steven as I shall. I don't, I cannot believe him to be more than infatuated for the moment, as I told him to-day—alas ! as I told him not an hour before you came ! He is fond, as we knew long ago, of play, and he has as much play as he chooses, without the trouble of white gloves and evening-dress at the Barrys' house. And then can it be otherwise, Kate ? his vanity is flattered by Mademoiselle Barry's manifest preference for himself. She is clever, no doubt, and 'sympathique,'—the wife or daughter of a man like M. Barry is sure to be sympathique—and her present rôle is just the one to touch the heart of my poor good Steven : delicate health, draws of an evening for money, M. Barry at her elbow making his hundreds and hundreds at lansquenet ! spends her life in studying among the picture galleries . . . and in improving the mind of any unusually-foolish victim of her father's, Steven Lawrence at the present moment ! upon whose arm she may chance to lean."

"Is she pretty ?" This was all Katharine could ask : then she broke down.

"No, and yes," answered Dot. "I have not seen her close, so I go by what Steven himself tells me. Mademoiselle Barry, according to his account, possesses no regularity of features, only a pair of dark grey eyes, a fragile white hand, an exquisite voice—why *do* plain women always have fragile white hands and exquisite voices, I wonder ?—possesses, to use his own words, not beauty, but something higher and better than all the classical upper-lips and rose-leaf complexions in the world. That his infatuation will be cured the moment we can get him out of Paris, I do not doubt !" cried Dot, warming to the part she was enacting, "any more than I doubt that his infatuation exists. My dear Katharine, he is never away from the Barrys' morning, noon, or night ; and in saying this I think I say enough. Now, does the whole fault of our estrangement rest with me or not ?"

"Forgive me, Dot, forgive me !" and coming over to Mrs. Lawrence's side, Katharine caught her hand, and pressed it with sudden warmth in her own. "Never fear I will say a harsh word to you, never fear I will take Steven Lawrence's part again ! *I have done with him !*" cried Miss Fane ; an expression, such as they had

never worn before, gathering round her lips. "And I think, please, we will speak on this subject no more.

"Only one thing, Kate. You can understand how even frivolous pleasures, even the attentions of a man like Clarendon Whyte, have seemed welcome to me?"

"I can understand everything," answered Katharine, while tears : were they all of pity for Dot? rose slowly in her eyes. Then she stooped and kissed Mrs. Lawrence, with a kiss whose fervour Dot's mind was, happily, too self-engrossed to seek to analyse.

In these five minutes Steven's warmest friend has gone over, heart and soul, to the enemy. His wife looks upon the wearing of her blue and silver as a certainty, and is content!

. . . But the Squire never went over to the enemy at all. Katharine spent the whole remainder of that day with Mrs. Lawrence : waited in the small close salon while Mademoiselle Aglaë aided in her mistress's noon-day transformation ; received Mr. Clarendon Whyte with a friendliness she had never shown towards him before, when, at three o'clock, that resistless hero came in to receive the daily incense upon which his vanity lived ; drove with Dora in the Champs Elysées, and again endured Mr. Whyte, and Mr. Whyte's conversation, for another hour later on in the afternoon. "And, I am glad to say, I know, that every word spoken against Dora is mere heartless, idle talk," she told her stepfather, when they were sitting alone together in the evening. "I am ashamed to think, papa, that I ever listened to a breath against her. She seems to know some of the nicest people in Paris, and of course, is admired and receives attention, poor Dot! *Wherever* the fault lies," went on Katharine, with cruel emphasis, "for very certain it is not hers. Indeed, I think, few women in poor Dot's position, would bear up one half as well as she does!" And she sighed.

"I don't know anything about 'bearing up,'" said the Squire, "and I don't understand women's dresses, but it struck me, when I saw you driving together to-day, that Dot had not at all the look of a modest English wife about her, and the room, when we called this morning, was enough to set any man against staying at home. When

I have had a talk with Lawrence we shall know better what he is about, but I'll not judge him unheard. If Mrs. Dora left her face as God made it, and went afoot instead of in that ridiculous sham-private brougham, I would be more ready to listen to her complaints against her husband."

Accordingly next morning, at an hour when Dot, as usual, was still sleeping off the effects of the night's dissipation, Mr. Hilliard made his appearance, well pleased and rosy, at the breakfast table of the Hôtel Rivoli; where Katharine, fresh and simply dressed as only an Englishwoman knows how to be at nine in the morning, was waiting to pour out his tea.

"Well, Kate, I've seen the culprit, and had it out with him! I called there early, and found him at his breakfast—a cup of ill-looking coffee set on one corner of the table, with that witch for his attendant—and we went out together for a walk. Your friend, whoever he was, seems to have written you very exaggerated accounts. It's all right, Kate, my love, as far as Lawrence is concerned."

"I am glad you think so, papa," said Katharine stiffly.

"Think? It is not a matter of thinking, but of figures," answered the Squire; "two or three more lumps of sugar, if you please, my dear; this French beetroot stuff doesn't sweeten a bit. I asked Lawrence frankly what he was doing,—told him I heard he had been burning his fingers, and the rest of it, and he assures me on his word that five-and-thirty pounds would very nearly cover his losses."

"Oh, it isn't the money alone," said Katharine, holding down her face. "I don't consider that Steven—that any married man has a right to associate with such people at all!"

"Kate, my dear," answered Mr. Hilliard, "excuse me for telling you that you are talking very great nonsense. Steven Lawrence is a young man, fond, as we knew even at Ashcot, of a bit of play when he comes across it. Do you expect, when Dora is off to her balls, that he will sit down among the millinery and read an improving book, or play cribbage with the witch, or what?"

"I think he should respect himself and his wife!" cried Katharine, *angry-eyed*; "and I don't—no papa, I *don't* think it a subject for *jesting*. If Steven Lawrence does not choose to go with his

wife into society—decent society!—he should at least not outrage her by exhibiting himself with the vile associates to whom he has sunk.”

“Exhibiting himself? vile associates?” cried the Squire, looking up from his broiled chicken. “Kate, child, keep your indignation for the things you understand. Give your cousin good advice about her dress, she wants it bad enough, and leave Steven alone. If the poor fellow can get hold of this M. Barry, or any other Englishman, to walk about with, it’s very natural he should do so, sooner than walk alone. As to vileness! if they had been very vile he would have lost more than five-and-thirty pounds by this time, you may be sure!”

“You think of nothing but money—money,” said Katharine, “as if *that* mattered!”

“It matters a great deal to me,” answered the Squire. “If Steven had made a fool of himself, my pockets, sooner or later, would have had to pay for it. But, with all his simplicity, the lad is not so ignorant of the world as you would think. He saw a good deal of sharp practice when he was a youth in California. Keeps his eyes open, from what he tells me, even on this Monsieur Barry and his friends——”

“Suspects them, yet stoops to be their associate still!” interrupted Miss Fane, with cold contempt.

“Well, as to suspecting,” said the Squire, “no man of sense ever sits down to play at cards with strangers without ‘suspecting’ that his own interest is what it behoves him to watch. You are a trifle unjust, it seems to me, Kate; like all women must be a partisan, not a friend. Lawrence has found amusements of his own (has spent less on them, probably, than ninety-nine men out of a hundred of his age would have done), and because this don’t exactly please his wife, and you, through his wife, he is to be called bad names.”

Katharine remained trifling, nervously, for a minute or two, with her tea-spoon. “Papa,” she said, at last, abruptly, “do you know” —every word coming from her lips with an effort—“that there is a Miss Barry?”

“A Miss Barry!” repeated the Squire, still with thorough good

humour ; "no, I hadn't heard of her before ; but what if there is! What does it matter to us if there are half a dozen Miss Barrys?"

"Oh, papa ! but Steven walks about the streets of Paris, is seen at the theatre with this person—a person no one visits—the daughter of a man like M. Barry !"

"My dear Katharine," said the Squire, "just take my advice, and don't listen to any ridiculous jealous fancies that Dora chooses to take up about her husband. What do you know worse about Miss Barry than about Mrs. Lawrence's ladies and honourables ? 'Twas her doing, dragging Lawrence away from the place where he was safe and happy—his own farm ; and the ball-going, and the hired brougham, and all the rest of the expense, has been her doing. Lawrence has played a few games of lansquenet, has lost altogether something under forty pounds ; and, so far as I can see (as you are so perfectly satisfied regarding your cousin), we might very well have saved ourselves our journey to Paris. Still, as we have come, we'll see all there is to be seen, and then take Dot home with us,—if we can. I wish I had as good an opinion of her and of her integrity," added Mr. Hilliard, "as I have of her husband's."

But Katharine was relentless in her judgments against Steven—relentless to an extent that a keener judge of human nature than the Squire might have held to savour rather of jealousy than of the calm and temperate displeasure of reasonable friendship. "Dear Kate, in short, thinks *quite* as I do about your intimacy with these people," Dot tells her husband, with triumph, on the first opportunity she can find ; and—"I should think my actions must be a matter of most thorough indifference, now and always, to Miss Fane !" is Steven's answer, as he turns curtly away. And so, when these two meet, Dot finds, not without satisfaction, that they talk a few common-places about Paris, about the weather, part with a cold shake of the hand ; and after this first meeting see, and seek to see, each other no more.

The ten days for which the Squire had leave of absence passed on ; and Dora and Katharine, as far as daylight hours went, were always together. . . . While she lives Katharine believes that she must remember with acutest remorse that miserable time in Paris !

The companionship that she put up with of Mr. Clarendon Whyte and of his peers ; the fatuous frivolity upon which she forced herself to smile ; the parading, the driving, the whirl of outward amusement where her heart was not, and across which Steven's reproachful face came upon her, ever and anon, like a ghost's ! Can any future, can any expiation atone, she asks herself, for the ignominious rôle she filled ; the share she bore in hastening the oncoming evil ; in smoothing the already too-smooth downward road along which Dora's feet were progressing ? So have most of us felt (poor actors, blindly acting our little parts !) when—the performance over, the lights burnt out—grey morning, breaking coldly, has shown us a dismantled stage : a stage of lath and plaster. . . . How different to what it looked when we strutted there, our own passions for audience, amidst the fever and excitement of the play !

Dora, all this time in capital spirits, is conscious of no darker oncoming evil than the day on which she shall, perforce, bid Paris good-bye ; of no steeper down-hill road than that gentle declivity along which she returns, daily, from her drive in the Bois. Katharine and the Squire have settled to remain until the eleventh, just long enough to see Lord Petres on his return to Paris ; the masquerade of Lady Sarah Adair is to be on the ninth. How if Steven—poor honest fellow !—could be brought to see the wisdom of going home, say about the seventh, merely to get Ashcot ready for her, and she return, two or three days later, under the sober chaperonage of Uncle Frank ? Over this possibility Dot only broods, believing silence, at the present juncture, her highest wisdom. But meantime Monsieur Valentin's sketch has been repaired, patiently, accurately as ever *Madonna of Raphael's* was repaired by reverential fingers. And *Mademoiselle Aglaë* is taking it for her model in the manufacture of a blue and silver dress over which she and Madame cogitate, night and day, with stealthy eagerness. And among the intimate friends of Mrs. Lawrence—Grizelda Long and Clarendon Whyte included—there exists very small fear as to the train-bearer of *Marie de Medicis* being found wanting at the last.

Thus, then, they stand : Dot wearing six delightfully expensive costumes per diem ; with hair, complexion, cut of dress, views of

human responsibility, all up to the last mark of the Second Empire : Katharine Fane, heavy in spirit, but acquiescent, at her side ; Mr. Clarendon Whyte—perfumed locks as usual well-set around the brainless head, feebly planning as much evil as he knows how to compass—her shadow ; poor honest Steven loitering, downcast, by Mademoiselle Barry's side through picture-galleries of a morning, losing more or less money every night, chafing, wearying with impatient heart under it all. Thus the dramatis personæ stand, in readiness for the curtain to rise upon the inevitable last act. The two who possess stout human hearts and capable human brains despondent, ill at rest : Mr. Clarendon Whyte and Dot quite untroubled in their butterfly conscience as they dance and flutter, and admire the brilliancy of each other's plumes, upon the brink of *Avernus* !



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

PROGRESS OF THE SILVER AND BLUE.

A WELCOME respite : the solitary change Katharine ever got from Mrs. Lawrence and Mrs. Lawrence's associates : was during the forenoon—a time of day when she and the Squire were free to run about Paris after their own fashion, untroubled by the dress and talk and thousand-and-one monotonous frivolities of butterfly, Champs Elysées' life.

Their only companion during these early walks was George Gordon, the "old dandy" who had first awakened Steven's jealousy in London, and whose friendship in the present sick state of Katharine's heart was more than ever welcome to her. George Gordon talked on none of the themes to which, among Mr. Clarendon Whyte and his fellows, she was forced, silently indignant, to listen. With George Gordon she could feel once more that she was with a man her equal, not a popinjay. George Gordon belonged, too, to the past : the girlish, untroubled past, when she had believed herself to be happy in her engagement, and when all the realities of life, the passionate pain, the restless fever of the last miserable months were as yet unknown. With George Gordon, the Squire trotting on con-

tentedly in front, Katharine could linger through the picture-galleries and churches, or walk along through the crisp sunny morning air and almost forget that she was in Paris ; almost forget that Steven was at Mademoiselle Barry's side, and that she had not so much as the right to mourn over his lost allegiance !

One February morning, the day on which Lord Petres was expected to return, Mr. Hilliard, wearied to death, in reality, of Paris and of sight-seeing, declared his intention of remaining at home by the fire to nurse his rheumatism ; and Katharine and George Gordon went off alone to spend the forenoon, for the last time, among the pictures at the Louvre. "I hope papa means to get better by this evening," said Katharine, as they were sitting in her favourite resting-place midway down the French gallery—for Miss Fane, I must confess, had no more appreciation of high art than Steven himself : preferred, and owned she preferred, Greuze to either Michael Angelo or Titian. "If he is not, you must be my chaperon, Captain Gordon. We have got a box at the Châtelet, and as it will be almost my last Paris dissipation, I should be sorry to have to stay at home."

She was looking paler, more spiritless, even, than usual this morning ; and George scrutinized her face steadily. "The thing they are playing at the Châtelet is Cendrillon still. Nothing whatever to see in it but fireworks, upholstery, and milliners' work, with a hundred or a hundred and fifty exceptionally ugly Frenchwomen dressed as fairies. If Mr. Hilliard's rheumatism gets worse, I can assure you you may congratulate yourself on being allowed to stop quietly at home."

"But upholstery and milliners' work are what we like," said Katharine, "or rather what Dora Lawrence likes. She has seen Cendrillon twice before, and tells me it is the most beautiful thing ever put on the stage."

"Dora Lawrence ?—but if you go with her, you will want neither Mr. Hilliard nor me," said George Gordon. "Mrs. Lawrence will chaperon you. For myself, I am really and truly engaged to dine with Petres, if he arrives."

"Mrs. Lawrence ! oh, I never look upon poor little Dot in the light of a chaperon," said Katharine. "Most people," she added,

with rather a faint smile, "would not be as anxious to decline the offer as you are, Captain Gordon."

Captain Gordon remained silently thoughtful for more than a minute. "Miss Fane," he said then, "if I speak to you like an old friend—I've a right to do so, mind, in virtue of my great age and the length of time I have known you, and Petres too—I wonder whether you will forgive me?"

Katharine's eyes sank abashed. Instinctively she felt that some mention of Steven, and of Steven's iniquities, was coming. "You know quite well I will not be offended," she said. "You know I shall be always ready to hear whatever you think fit to tell me."

"Well, then, I will say it in three words. We have never spoken yet about that letter I wrote you—I'm afraid what I was forced to say in it gave you pain?"

"It gave me infinite pain," answered Katharine, without lifting her eyes from the ground.

"And your coming to Paris was a little, perhaps, the result of what you heard. So much I have guessed. Well——"

"Oh, don't hesitate!" cried Katharine. "Tell me in three words, please, as you promised."

"Well, it's a pity you should be seen so much with Mrs. Lawrence, then," said George Gordon, point-blank. "A great pity. I ought to have had the courage to tell you so long ago."

And now Katharine did look up; her face all aglow with indignant surprise. "A pity I should be seen with Mrs. Lawrence—with my cousin? You are prejudiced; you never, in your heart, liked poor little Dot, or you would not speak like this."

"I believe I am the least prejudiced man living," said George Gordon, in his gentle voice; "still, I hold it a pity that you should help, or be thought to help, on the intimacy between your cousin and a man like Clarendon Whyte. These things happen every day, I know. Mrs. Lawrence is a very pretty little woman, and a very nice little woman—I have not a word to say against her—and her husband, like a man of sense, reconciles himself to his position. What I do say is, that 'tis a pity Katharine Fane's name should be mentioned in connection with the Lawrence household. If Petres-

was in Paris he would tell you the same. There are a few women—just a very few in the world—whose names deserve never to be so much as breathed upon, and I hold you to be one of them, Miss Fane.”

“And I hold that the world is a cruel and an unjust world!” exclaimed Katharine. “You have spoken plainly, so will I. Your letter *was* the cause that brought us to Paris, and we found—found——” But her voice broke down, died, when she would have forced it to speak a condemning word of Steven!

“You found Mrs. Lawrence enjoying herself immensely, engaged to three balls a night, half the young men in Paris wild about her, Mr. Clarendon Whyte her inseparable companion, and resolved——”

“I found my cousin less happy than I would have liked to find her in her own home,” interrupted Katharine, coldly, “and I intend to be seen with her, to be intimate with her, always. Let the world say its worst—I can bear it! What does the world know of the sorrows we women have to endure, silently, in our own hearts? Dora is like a child! as fond of pretty dresses and dancing as a girl of fifteen. Her life, when she returns to England, will have few enough pleasures in it—poor little thing! and I am glad, yes, Captain Gordon, glad to see her make the most of any poor amusement she can get now. She needs something more than her own home can give her, heaven knows!” And even while she says this, with flushing cheeks, with kindling eyes, in her inmost heart Katharine knows every word she utters is uttered against her own conscience, and stops short.

“And why (more than all other women, that is to say) does Mrs. Lawrence need amusement that her own home cannot give her?” George Gordon asked. “Don’t be angry with me; this is the last disagreeable thing I shall say; but why—for you are always logical, Miss Fane—why, married to as good a fellow as Lawrence—Petres told me all about him—is your cousin to be so deeply pitied?”

“I think you spoke of Steven Lawrence in a very different strain when you wrote to me,” cried Katharine, reddening. “Pray is he going through his apprenticeship to lansquenet and baccarat still? The subject of each others’ failings is one on which I will allow that men have fullest right always to be heard.”

But of Steven Captain Gordon could tell no more than he had already told in his letter. Mrs. Lawrence, the beautiful little Mrs. Lawrence, "la Béb  Anglaise," as she was called : gilded Parisian youth fixing on the same name for her that she had gone by, sixteen years before, in the Faubourg St. Marceau : was a theme on which half the clubs of Paris talked—in a certain strain. The companions, the actions, the existence of the B b 's husband were details, naturally, of supremest unimportance to every one. Captain Gordon had heard accidentally that Steven Lawrence spent his time among a set of men where, sooner or later, spoliation was certain ; but what of this ? Most men had to pay pretty dearly for their first introduction to Parisian play. It might be a good thing for a simple kind of fellow like Dora Lawrence's husband to be well fleeced now ; would teach him, perhaps, the wisdom of playing with men of whose character he knew something for the remainder of his life.

"If Dora Lawrence's husband were only the simple kind of fellow that you think !" cried Katharine. "Unfortunately he is not, and for a man such as Steven Lawrence *is*, I would not have much faith in the good that was to be attained through doubtful associates and lansquen t. But come away," she interrupted herself, rising hastily, "and let us look at the pictures—a far pleasanter spectacle than the lives of men and women living in this work-day world ! It was right of you, no doubt, to say what you said, and I . . . must just do all I can to take care of poor little Dot now. We have each of us our own burthen to carry, you know—our own burthen !" And, with her face wearing a more spiritless look even than before, she put her hand under George Gordon's arm, then walked away silently at his side, down the gallery.

Greuze and Watteau, as usual, were the favourites with the crowd of patient female copyists in the Louvre. Almost with a feeling of envy Katharine looked at these women as she walked along. That brisk-eyed, grey-haired old Frenchwoman enamelling the "Cruche Cass e," on porcelain, with such Chinese fidelity of touch ; that slim young girl standing, in her linen blouse, before the easel where the blooming faces of the cottage bride and her sister were growing into life under her brush :—How peaceful the existence of these artist-

women must be, shut away in this quiet gallery from the glare and noise and trouble of the outer world ! What care could they know, save over the drying of paint or varnish ? what despair, but the momentary artist despair of emulating some turn of lip or eyebrow in their models ? And, even as she thought this, the girl whom she was watching looked round (showing a face with beauty beyond that of line or colouring, on the delicate, broad forehead, the serious, sensitive lips), and Katharine saw, with sudden start, a tall man's figure upon her other side. It was Steven, and this was Mademoiselle Barry. No need for Katharine Fane to be told her name ! This woman, whom a moment ago she had ignorantly envied, this girl-artist, shut out from the noise and trouble of the outer world, was M. Barry's daughter ; the clever adventuress who was "educating" Steven ; holding captive, not his senses alone, but his intelligence, as she, with her shallow gift of beauty, had not done in the fairest days of their short-lived friendship ! M. Barry was with them, of course—no mother was ever more scrupulously watchful than this Irish adventurer over his girl—but him Katharine never saw. With her hand pressed closer on her companion's arm she walked quickly by, giving a cold, half-bow to Dora's husband as she passed ; then turning to George Gordon, began to smile and whisper with him just as she had done on that night when the poor backwoodsman learnt his first bitter lesson in civilization at the opera.

"That was Steven Lawrence himself—don't you remember seeing him in our box at Covent Garden, before he was engaged to Dot ? He has such singular acquaintance that I never know whether I ought to speak to him or not. If it had not been for the—person who was painting, I would have liked to take one last look at the village sisters before bidding them good-bye."

And she turned : met Steven's eyes looking after her with the look she knew so well, and felt, with sudden repentant revulsion, that all his misdeeds were condoned on the spot ! Must not any man of sober sense choose to spend his time thus, rather than amidst the parade and glitter, the dressing and driving, of the Champs Elysées ? Might not Steven Lawrence find greater profit in Mademoiselle Barry's society than in that of Grizelda Long and Clarendon Whyte,

yet be guiltless of infidelity to Dora? If she, Katharine, held out her hand, could she not at this moment save him from the Barrys—from every dangerous influence in the world? And was it not a duty (quick as thought itself came this impulse, now that she had seen the enemy face to face) that she should at least make an effort towards his salvation? Pride doubtless forbade that she should stoop so far—but what mattered pride? This Moloch, before whom she had already sacrificed so much: this Moloch, but for whose senseless worship she might now, instead of looking forward to a starved, a barren future, be leading the wholesome country life for which nature had fitted her: her hands full of work, her heart of love; finding pleasure not in Parisian toilettes, but in the seed-time and the harvest, the summer's blossoming and the autumn's fading; in all the commonest sweetest joys of human life, and with the man who loved her, whose character, whatever it lacked of outward polish or fine-breeding, suited hers so utterly at her side!

She walked through the remainder of the Louvre and home to the Hotel Rivoli in silence that must have offended any one less devoid of personal vanity than George Gordon. Then—the Squire still happy over his rheumatism—started to pay her daily visit to Dora. "I have been thinking all this time over what you told me," she said, as Captain Gordon was leaving her at the door of the Lawrences' apartment: the moenad having signified, after slight hesitation, that Madame might be visible for Mademoiselle; "so you must not wonder at my being such a stupid companion. If you see Lord Petres this evening say I wish very much to speak to him, also"—with a tremble of the voice, this—"that I am well, and have been enjoying myself in Paris."

Early though it was, Mrs. Lawrence had already a visitor—Miss Grizelda Long. A mass of sky-blue silk, silver cord, and white satin, hastily pushed aside on Katharine's entrance, was lying before the two women on the table. "And now I may go away!" cried Grizelda with playful affectation of jealousy, as Dot jumped up to receive her cousin: the old feeling of mutual repulsion between Katharine and the Phantom had in nowise lessened of late. "I suppose Dora, love, we may safely say that everything is settled now?"

"I suppose so," said Dora, brusquely; "but I'll send to-morrow morning, and let you know for certain." Then she followed her friend to the door, exchanged a whisper or two with her at parting, and, coming back, seated herself, with a little well-acted yawn of weariness, beside Katharine.

"That good, eager, tiring, old Phantom! What a martyr I am to her! What a terribly long ell creatures of her species do take when you have once given them an inch! Why didn't Uncle Frank come? Is Lord Petres really expected? What makes you so early to-day?"

Mrs. Lawrence was not thoroughly at her ease, and Katharine noticed it. "Papa is laid up with rheumatism, Lord Petres is really expected, and I came early because I have something especial to say to you. What is all this new finery that you and Miss Long were so intent upon? blue silk and silver, and white satin jacket . . . waistcoat . . . what is it? Dora! Is this a costume for the Phantom or for you?"

"For neither," cried Dora promptly; and as she spoke, she rose, opened the door leading to her bedroom, and consigned the whole heap of millinery into the hands of Mademoiselle Aglaë. "There is to be a fancy-ball, for charity, and Grizelda, who, as usual, takes a part in everything, is getting me to help about some of the costumes. It was of this ball she was speaking with her accustomed absurd air of mystery, when you came in. Poor dear Grizelda! I hope when I get to her age I shall have done with all these tiring pomps and vanities!" Dot threw herself down again into her arm-chair, and clasped her tiny hands solemnly. "I've had just seven weeks of it all now, and I assure you, honestly, I'm tired of my life and everything in it—myself most—and am quite ready to go back with you and Uncle Frank to England."

"I am glad to hear you say so," said Miss Fane. "It was precisely about this I wanted to speak to you. You *must* come back to England with us, Dot; I will get papa to wait another day or two, if you choose, and, while you are here, do try and make Steven go about with you, and don't be seen any more with Mr. Clarendon Whyte. I know, from authority I can't doubt, that your intimacy with him is—is talked about." Having said which, Katharine held

down her face, and blushed as furiously as if she herself had been guilty.

"We discussed this all once before," said Dot, calmly ;—"Don't think me rude, Kate, I can't help yawning to-day—and I think I told you the exact light in which I regarded Clarendon Whyte and his friendship. Who is your authority? What can even the most malicious person find to say of me? Why, during the last week I have never been seen at all, except, with you. As to making Steven go about with me more——"

"Have you tried it? Have you done your best to persuade him?" cried Katharine as Mrs. Lawrence hesitated, and shook her head wisely.

"I asked him this morning, Kate—woke early on purpose to speak to him before he went out—and asked him to go with us to the theatre to-night (I was afraid, from the way Uncle Frank complained yesterday, he might be laid up), and, Katharine, my dear, imagine what he answered! He had already promised—strange coincidence! to go to the Châtelet to-night with M. Barry and his daughter, but would come round to my box during the evening. We had already had separate engagements so long that I must not be offended at his refusal. After the kindness he had received from the Barrys he could not think of breaking his word to them at the last. Now *shall* we give up going?" said Dot, plaintively. "Wouldn't it be better to stay quietly at home, for me to spend the evening with you and Uncle Frank, than be placed in such a humiliating position as this?"

"I am not quite sure that the position is humiliating," was Katharine's answer. "I have been considering a great deal about all this, Dora, and the conclusion I come to is, that both you and I have judged Steven too harshly. You told me the world had only one opinion of his intimacy with Mademoiselle Barry; it seems that the world has never troubled itself about their intimacy at all! And I have seen her—I saw her with Steven in the Louvre not an hour ago—and—" the words went sorely against her heart to speak, but she brought them out steadily, generously, "she looks a quiet, simple little English girl—not at all like the designing adventuress we have

said such bitter things about. This much, at all events, I know, Steven would never come to your box from Miss Barry's unless he felt that for him to do so could be no humiliation to you."

"Well—well—perhaps we had better go, then," said Mrs. Lawrence, after narrowly watching the expression of her cousin's face. "Perhaps a woman always does make the best of a bad position by accepting, or seeming to accept it quietly. Only one favour I must ask of you, Kate—if we go—if, that is to say, you have a chance of talking to Steven—warn the poor foolish fellow about the position he stands in, make him promise if you can (alas! you would have more influence with him than I should) to return home *at once*, with or without me, as he chooses. Will you do this, Kate, for my sake?"

"I will speak to Steven, certainly, if he gives me a chance of speaking to him," said Katharine, rather hesitatingly. "But I don't know why I should ask him to go away from Paris. What possible necessity can there be for him to leave before we all go. Lord Petres will be here to-night, Steven always gets on well with him, and——"

"And if I tell you that there is every reason for him to leave at once! If I tell you that his honour may be saved that way, and that way only!" exclaimed Mrs. Lawrence. "I have been told to-day—ah! how shall I put it into words! that people begin to say Steven Lawrence does not lose, perhaps, because he and M. Barry understand each other so well! Charlie Wentworth of the Blues—not left Eton a year, poor child—has lost near upon a thousand pounds at the Barrys' house in the last two nights. Did your friend, who knows so much of Paris news, tell you that? And they say the police are getting scent of it, and any night they may be all seized—Steven and everybody. Who shall tell whether as victims or accomplices?" Mrs. Lawrence's lips quivered with emotion.

"And who says this?" cried Katharine, after a minute's silence; broken only by the voices of Mademoiselle Aglaë and the ménad, babbling and shrieking, as Frenchwomen would shriek and babble upon the brink of doom, in the other room. "Who that knows Steven Lawrence makes this monstrous assertion and dares to repeat it to you?"

"The person who repeated it was Grizelda Long. (You do not give me your authority for the cruel things that were said of me, but I can guess it!" cried Dora, kindling. "George Gordon never loved me. Pity he's not at his favourite amusement, fighting with *men*, instead of slaying the reputation of helpless, innocent women!) Grizelda Long—and in this she acted as a friend—told me the dreadful story about Charlie Wentworth and the way poor Steven is being spoken of, and everything. You promised once to be my friend whatever happened, Kate! Hold by that promise now. Don't believe a word that cruel tongues find to say against me, and—and get Steven away from Paris, and from the Barrys' influence." And Dot covered up her face between her hands and wept.

I have said before that, following the dictates of such narrow wisdom as she possessed, Mrs. Lawrence seldom trenched further than was necessary upon absolute falsehood. If the moving of heaven and earth could get Steven out of Paris before next Thursday—only two days hence—Dora would do her best that heaven and earth should be moved. And Grizelda Long had really told her the story, units only multiplied by tens, of Charlie Wentworth's losses; Grizelda with her usual readiness in aught that affected the sapping of a man's character, had, out of her own phantom consciousness, evoked the world's probable opinion of Steven for not being ruined! Finally, rather that her story should have artistic finish than because facts authorized the statement, Grizelda had hinted at the likelihood of M. Barry and his friends being eventually seized by the police. All that Dot said had truth in it—leavened by just the necessary admixture of falsehood. And she was sorry in her heart that she need enlist falsehood on her side at all; sorry that she was forced to play a double part towards Katharine, whom she loved, towards Steven whom she half feared, half revered, wholly pitied! If he had been a trifle less bigoted, could only have been brought to see that the silver and blue, on the authority of Lady Sarah Adair, might be worn by a decent Christian matron, all this had been spared her! Still, the silver and blue *must* be worn. That crowning necessity submerged all smaller moralities as to means in Dot's conscience. The silver and blue must be worn; to wear it Steven must be sent

away out of Paris, and the influence to send him thence was Katharine's. And in a few more days all would be over, she thought—a fresh tinge of remorse seizing her as she watched the quivering pain on Katharine's face, heard her falter out promises to do her utmost in turning aside this threatened shame from Steven! And sitting by the dull fireside at Ashcot she would have the delights of a crowning Parisian success to think over; and Steven—Katharine be none the worse for the little white lies into which circumstances had driven her for its attainment.

No thought whatever of Mr. Clarendon Whyte filled Dot's soul; no human passion, innocent or guilty; nothing but passion for the blue silk and silver cord in which her last success was to be won. Unhappily, blue silk and silver cord can, on occasion, be quite as strong a motive power for evil as was ever the love of Cleopatra or of Helen. Stronger, perhaps, in the present great millinery epoch of the world!



CHAPTER XXXIX.

RECONCILED.

THE morning on which Steven Lawrence met M. Barry and his daughter in the Luxembourg gardens had, as I have said, commenced an episode, destined to be no unimportant one in his history. Time pressed upon him heavily still: was he not in a city, shut away within walls from the sight of trees and sky, from the winds of heaven above; above all, from the sense of personal liberty, which, to a man only half-tamed like Steven, is as the very breath of life itself? But yet each day as it passed was no longer an actual enemy to be drugged, got rid of it at any cost, as in the time when accounts of his wife's balls, and when his own aimless wanderings along streets and boulevards, had been his sole resource.

The shallow little sarcasm by which Dot had sought to describe his intimacy with Mademoiselle Barry had (as is often the case with shallow sarcasms) a deeper significance than the speaker supposed. In a certain sense the last three weeks had been "educating" Steven Lawrence rapidly; educating him as only the society of a refined

and gifted woman can, perhaps, educate a man whom accident rather than incapacity has debarred from culture in his youth. Lingered by Mademoiselle Barry's side in the *Ceil de Bœuf* at Versailles, or on the spot where the Bastille fell, he had had the story of the great revolution brought before him vividly, picturesquely, as no book-labour of his own could ever have brought it. Through her informal teaching, he had been led to see that within cities, at easels, desks, looms, pale-faced men had lived, and might be living, lives nobler, manlier (if to help on human progress be manly) than those of land-tillers in Kent, or even of hunters in the wilderness. From lips to whom the theme was one of love, had been taught dimly to discern—he, a Lawrence, and a Shilohite—what beauty shone from the *Venus of Milo*, the *Magdalene of Veronese*, in the Louvre : in fine, had stood, with uncertain feet as yet, upon the threshold of that world of intelligence and of art in which the girl herself lived. Dora was quite right. In three short weeks Mademoiselle Barry's influence had begun to "educate" Steven Lawrence.

To any softer feeling than friendship, even had Steven been a free man, it is more than doubtful that the intimacy would have led. Love is a passion so singularly little dependent upon development of intelligence, or indeed upon mental process of any kind ! Mademoiselle Barry's evident liking for himself touched—I will not say with Dot, his vanity—but his gratitude ; her voice and face and pretty feminine ways made their friendship an infinitely warmer one than any friendship he could have felt for a man. He was sorry for her. With the instinctive sympathy all fine natures know for each other, divined with what repugnance this sensitive girlish heart must shrink from a life to which affection for her father bound her. Here, with gratitude, sympathy, pity, his feelings for her began and ended. Katharine Fane goes past him smiling, on George Gordon's arm ; half turns her face, blushing, softening (fairer, thinks Steven, than all pictures or marbles in all galleries of the world,) and the old madness—the sickening jealousy, the hopeless pain which yet holds in it a sweetness no pleasure can ever yield—is back upon him, and poor little Mademoiselle Barry, forgotten ! Katharine Fane's influence had in very truth blotted his entire life for him : he owed his mar-

riage to her ; she had made no secret as to the side she took in his divided household ; had associated with Dora's associates, had lived Dora's life, had never given him more than a cold bow, or colder word, since she came to Paris. But she had looked at him with softened, blushing face, with wistful pity in her eyes now ! And in a second all the blessed summer hours in Kent ; the hour when he found, the children in her arms, upon the waste ; the hour when they were alone at her sunset on the sea—all the supremest golden hours of his love returned, in one great wave, across the yeoman's heart, and he forgave her. That story never could be finished, it seemed. That book *must* open at the same page to the end.

For the first time since his acquaintance with the Barrys began, Steven had been invited to dine in the Rue des Ursulines to-day. On former occasions he had either met M. Barry and his daughter at the theatre to which they were going, or had dined first with them at some modest restaurant in the neighbourhood. But to-day was an exceptional festivity, got up to celebrate Mademoiselle Barry's birthday, "a grand affair of evening costume, and a première loge de face," M. Barry said, putting his arm tenderly round his daughter, when she came in, dressed for dinner. "Katie, child, you are looking charming ! You will make quite a sensation at the Châtelet to-night."

"Charlie Wentworth of the Blues," the infatuated loser, by Grizelda Long's computation, of near upon a thousand pounds already, was the fourth member of the party, and broke out at once into such florid compliments as became his years and innocence. Steven was silent ; and the girl's quiet eyes thanked him. Her beauty, if, indeed, she possessed it at all, was beauty that could never show to poorer advantage than amidst the brilliant colouring, under the glare and gaslight of a theatre : even in speaking to his daughter a too palpable note of flattery made itself heard through every word M. Barry uttered. To-night, her small pale face was paler than usual : she was dressed in sober grey silk, a black veil, pinned, mantilla-fashion, in her hair, falling round her throat and shoulders ; no ornament save a bouquet of flowers, Steven's birthday gift, in her hand.

"The enemy is only a plain, badly dressed enemy after all, Katharine," whispered Mrs. Lawrence, when Mademoiselle Barry made her appearance among the gorgeous toilettes and complexions at the Châtelet (a poor little sensitive plant in a hot-house full of flaming many-hued exotics). "What taste some people have ! You see them nearly opposite us ? Papa and Mademoiselle decorously in front, and Charlie Wentworth, the victim to be slain, with *my* husband in the background !" Having said which Dot straightway forgot her husband's friends, and her husband's existence, resigning herself to the pleasure—the highest her nature knew—of seeing half the glasses in the house directed to the Bébé Anglaise, the fancy, the fashion of the hour ; also of listening to the soul-thrilling murmurs of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, or any other woman-slayer of his tribe—this to Dot was matter of merest detail—who might happen to be near her during the remainder of the evening.

"Who is that English lady who looks at our box so often ?" said Mademoiselle Barry, turning, when the first act was nearly over, to Steven. "The lady in white, and with a white flower in her hair. She looks like the same person who bowed to you in the gallery this morning."

"And so she is," answered Steven, absently. "That lady is Miss Fane, a friend—a distant connection I would say—of ours."

"And the little girl with the fair hair and great dark eyes ?"

"The little girl is Mrs. Lawrence."

"Your—your——"

"My wife," said Steven, with rather a short laugh. "Ah, Mademoiselle, you never knew before that I had the happiness of being married !"

Without answering a word Mademoiselle Barry turned away, and resumed her contemplation of the lamp-lit garden scene upon which the curtain was about to fall : a scene replete with those cunning effects of light and shade, those exquisitely contrasted groups in which the fairy pieces of the Châtelet excel, and which (whatever may be said of their worth, intellectually), must always possess a certain charm, a certain practical value to an artist's eye.

Her eyes must be dim to-night, the poor child thought. She had worked too late in the gallery this afternoon, or—or the gas pained her ; for stage and audience alike, darkened boxes, and fairy palace-garden, lit with its hundred lamps, swam before her in a sort of mist. "Exert yourself to talk a little," said her father in her ear ; the affectionate genial expression on his face, but a tone his daughter understood in his whisper. "Lawrence has left the box already, and the other is *not* to go away—do you hear ?" Then aloud, "You look pale ; you find the house too warm for you, my Katie," and as he spoke M. Barry rose and opened the door of the box. "Mr. Wentworth, will you give my daughter your arm ? We shall have time to take a few turns in the foyer before the beginning of the next act."

The foyer of the Châtelet, opening out many-windowed upon its broad stone balcony, was thronged, for to-night was the first appearance this winter of Irma Marié, and the world of Paris had gone in full-dress to see her. Close beside the central opening to the boxes stood a group of Englishwomen—Mademoiselle Barry's eyes lighted on them in an instant—Dora Lawrence, Katharine Fane, Grizelda Long, with a crowd of young men, English and French, fluttering around ; old Grizelda herself noteworthy for an hour as the companion of la belle Bébé. Leaning on Charlie Wentworth's arm, and with her father by her side, the poor little "enemy" walked up and down before them several times (enduring much severe scrutiny from the phantom-eyes of Miss Long and the superbly contemptuous eye-glass of Mr. Whyte), and at last, just as the bell was ringing for the second act, Steven came up, directly in the presence of his wife and his wife's friends, and spoke to her.

"Why, Lawrence, I thought we had lost you !" cried M. Barry, putting his hand with friendly familiarity upon Steven's shoulder. "I was just saying to Katie I was afraid you had grown tired of us and gone away."

"Not at all," answered Steven, "I have only been getting a breath of fresh air on the balcony outside, and——"

And he started, hearing his own name spoken close behind him, and turning, found himself face to face with Katharine Fane.

"I want to speak to you," she said, looking up at him earnestly. "Can you spare me five minutes? I will not detain you longer from your friends?"

Steven stopped of course; and Mademoiselle Barry, with a half-bow and a just perceptible increase of colour upon her face, walked on with her father and Charlie Wentworth in the direction of their box.

"I wanted so much to speak to you!" Katharine repeated, "and—and Dora and I thought perhaps you would not be angry if I interrupted you just for a minute or two. Will you forgive me?" And before he could answer, her hand, all in a tremble, lay within his arm.

They had never been alone together since that evening when they rode home through the December twilight from the hunting-field, and involuntarily the heart of each—here amidst the artificial glitter, the brocades, the diamond dust, the patchouli of this Parisian crowd, went back to Clithero! To a road across a dusky moorland; to lanes fresh with the wintry smell of new-ploughed earth; to a shadowy avenue, with dead leaves faintly rustling in the boughs above. . . . "I thought you never meant to speak to me any more!" said Katharine, very low; and "How could I tell what answer you would give me if I did?" was Steven's reply. Only this: not another word of explanation; yet they were reconciled.

Dot, who was returning to her box on the arm of Mr. Clarendon Whyte, looked back at them with a friendly little nod and smile, then disappeared in the crowd.



CHAPTER XL.

PARIS BY LAMPLIGHT.

IT was a brilliant winter night. Cloudless and white with stars quivered the frozen sky above the lamp-lit glare, the noisy turmoil of the great city; the atmosphere was intensely clear; a sprinkle of new-fallen snow showed forth in sharpest relief the living phantasmagoria of horses, carriages, and men that swept in one ever-changing, ever-monotonous stream across the Place of the Châtelet.

"A different world to Clithero," said Katharine, after a long silence. "How will you and Dora be able to return to our dull village-life after the excitement both of you have been going through here?"

"Dora must answer for herself," was Steven's reply. "The only really happy hour of my Paris experiences will be the one in which I find myself starting back towards Ashcot. You must know this," he added; "you must know pretty well what kind of excitement this shut-in city-life can be to me."

They were standing, side by side, upon the balcony of the Châtellet; deserted, now that the performance had begun, by all but themselves; and Katharine's hand had rested, till this instant, upon Steven's arm. She took it hastily away. "Papa and I have been here more than a week, Mr. Lawrence, and have scarcely seen you yet! If you find no excitement in Paris, it seems to me that you have at least plenty of engagements, of *friends*," a cruel little emphasis on that word; "to fill up your time."

"My engagements," said Steven, "consist in loitering through picture-galleries (as you saw me to-day), or idling through the streets of a morning. My friends are M. Barry and his daughter. If I had thought you wanted me, I would have been with you every day since you have been here. But you have not wanted me, Miss Katharine, and you have shown it."

There was no more possibility now than there had ever been of talking to Steven with the enigmatic circumlocution of good breeding, so Katharine found herself constrained to speak out. "And because—you have wrongly fancied that we did not wish to see you, has that been a reason why you should visit our misdeeds upon poor little Dot? a reason why you should spend your life with these persons, at whose side I have twice seen you to-day. If we have not striven to compete with them, sir, if I *have* been cold to you, when by chance we have met, it has been——"

"It has been?" said Steven, as she hesitated. "Let me hear, please, what accusation you have to bring against me."

"My accusation is that you don't care for Dot as you ought!" cried Miss Fane. "You have not been married four months, you are

bride and bridegroom still, and yet you are never together, and you let Dot go where she chooses, and you spend your own time with people who are unworthy of you" Then she stopped short.

"Those are three accusations, not one," said Steven, "and my conscience acquits me on all of them. I care for Dora, as I always did. I let her go where she chooses, because I have not the power to constrain her, and I spend my time at present with a person very much more than worthy of me."

"With M. Barry, that is to say?"

"No, with M. Barry's daughter," answered Steven, quietly. "M. Barry and I find no more to say to each other now than on the first day of our acquaintance. He is a man whose life has been passed within walls—has never handled a gun, or ridden across country in his life! has no interest beyond the gossip of the newspapers or the pavement—how the Emperor looked to-day, what Bismarck is reported, by private telegram, to have said yesterday——"

"And what victims M. Barry, himself, is likely to have at baccarat and écarté in the evening," interrupted Katharine. "Steven, if we are talk to each other at all, let it be as we have always talked, frankly. You have told me, you know, that while you lived you would always speak the truth, and only the truth to me! Of your friend, Mademoiselle Barry, I know—I wish to know nothing. Of the father, I hear just as bad things as it is possible to hear said of a man, and, for our old friendship's sake," her voice changed a little, "I warn you about him. Don't be seen with M. Barry any more—don't go to his house again. It was for this I wanted to speak to you. Come back with Dot and me and see papa this evening, instead of remaining with the Barrys. Now I ask—I beg this of you, as a favour to myself. Will you refuse me?"

"I have no right, I feel, to advise you," she went on, as Steven did not answer, "no right to request anything of you now. Once, long ago, I think perhaps you would not have refused a request of mine—but that time is over. I know very well that it is not I who ought to be saying this to you now, but Dora and you live divided lives, and so I thought—thought you would forgive me, at least, if I spoke. People are saying things I cannot bear to hear about your

intimacy with M. Barry, and what we want is that you should go back to England at once, and let papa and me bring Dot with us. At all events, don't go to their house any more—promise me you won't ! Don't even be seen again in their box to-night !”

For a minute Steven stood irresolute. “Ask me anything else,” he said at length. “I will go back to England when you choose—to-morrow—only too gladly. I am engaged, have been engaged for days, to spend this evening at M. Barry's house. Mademoiselle Barry is the only friend I've made in Paris, remember, and, even with you bidding me, I don't see how I could pay back her kindness with discourtesy at the last.”

“Oh, as you choose,” said Katharine, growing frigid in an instant at Steven's kindly mention of the enemy. “I see that I over-estimated the influence an old friendship might have over you still ! But at least I have done what Dora wished in warning you. M. Barry is spoken of openly as an adventurer and a card-sharper. At any hour may be exposed, they say, with his *friends*, by the police. Remain his associate or not, as you choose. Perhaps you will take me back to poor Dora now. I have kept you too long already from the society that gives you pleasure.”

She put her hand within his arm again. The touch, cold and distant though it was, thrilled through Steven's heart. “Tell me what I am to do !” he exclaimed, “and you know that I will obey you. What are the Barrys—what is all the world compared to the chance of offending you ? I am not to speak to Mademoiselle Barry any more ? Very well. She will call me unmannerly, ungrateful, with justice. So long as you forgive me, will let me be with you, what does it matter ? Miss Fane—Katharine, shall we go back to the days when I used to walk with you in summer ? No—not to those, I'm a fool, I don't know what I am saying—to that last night when I rode back with you from Stourmouth to the Dene ! You have not forgotten it ?”

“We can go back to nothing,” said Katharine, very low. “Every day of our lives dies, with all its folly, and is buried as it passes, and it's best so ! I am not the same Katharine Fane who walked with you in summer, you must know.” She tried, with indifferent

success, to laugh. "I have grown older and wiser ; cured, I hope, of some of my faults even !" Then, "Oh, Steven !" with a sudden outburst of repentance, she cried, "I was wrong ! I spoke unjustly in what I said just now—forgive me. You will return home with Dot and me to our hotel, but of course you must go and say good-bye to Mademoiselle Barry. I was unjust—have been a little unjust towards you, I think, in my heart, ever since we came to Paris, and I repent of it ! I ask you to forgive me. All I claim—all I can ever claim—is a sister's right, remember, to care for your happiness, and for Dora's."

"Happiness !" repeated Steven, under his breath. "Ah ! that is a word it doesn't do to talk about now. What happiness does come to me it is by snatches like this—ten minutes after weeks of such a life as mine has been since I saw you last ! Sometimes I think," he went on, "that people like Clarendon Whyte, or poor little Dora, have the best of it. Coats and waistcoats make the one happy ; silks and ribbons and her mock-fine brougham the other. And they dress and dine and dance, and know neither deeper pains nor higher pleasures till they die ! Pity she married me !" he cried ; all this more as if he were unconsciously speaking aloud than addressing Katharine : "she would have been happier with any other man than with me, and but for her I would have sold the farm, and gone back to old Klaus in the backwoods, the only life suited to me, long ago."

"Gone back to the woods !" repeated Katharine. "Sold Ashcot ! Ah, you know very well you are not saying this in earnest. As if Ashcot would ever pass away from the hands of the Lawrences !"

"If I had not married it would have passed from mine," said Steven. "When I came home from America I had set one hope, one desire, before my eyes, and if I had gained *that*, life on the old farm—hard as it is for a man to get a living out of his land—would have made me more than contented. As it is——"

"As it is you have your work, you have yourself to think of, just the same !" interrupted Katharine. "Should a man let his life be spoilt through one misadventure, the shipwreck of one foolish hope ? Does any man possess exactly what he once dreamt, in his blindness,

would have suited him ? In time Dora and you will grow liker of mind than you are now. She will go back, poor little Dot, stronger to endure the country after the tonic of all this Paris gaiety, and then——”

A burst of military stage music, a tumultuous clapping of hands, reached them at this instant from the interior of the theatre. Some jest of “Hurluberlu’s,” some misadventure of “Jolicoco’s” in the fairy piece setting all its Parisian spectators into childish ecstasies of amusement.

“While we live our lives will be as much apart as our thoughts are at this moment,” said Steven, calmly. “And, for Dora certainly, the best thing that could happen would be for me to go back even now to the woods and to my old mate there. A man of my age is too old to educate. There is the truth of it. Only one influence could ever have really changed me, and that I’ve missed. The story is told.”

“I thought Mademoiselle Barry had been ‘educating’ you, as you call it,” said Katharine. “I thought, from what Dot told me, that you were beginning to care for pictures and statues, and historical associations, and I know not what besides, under Mademoiselle Barry’s influence ?”

“Mademoiselle Barry has taught me enough to show me that I know nothing,” answered Steven. “Enough to make me see, as I never did before, my proper place in the world. Miss Katharine,” he turned to her abruptly ; “why did you never teach me how ignorant I was ? With Mademoiselle Barry I feel at every minute how much other men have read, and thought, and done. With you——”

“With me you certainly were never made to feel that !” said Katharine, quickly. “I am too stupid, have read too little myself, ever to make another person conscious of his intellectual defects.”

“With you,” he answered, “I felt that I, Steven Lawrence, could become . . . just what Katharine Fane chose to make of me ! There was part of my madness. I was ignorant, and yet—how was it ? five minutes of that ignorance seemed to raise me higher than all the learning I can go through again while I live !”

M. Barry looked up, as Steven entered the box, with all his accustomed obsequious friendliness, making room for him at once behind his daughter's chair. "I was only waiting for your return to go," whispered the girl, as Steven leaned forward to speak to her. "Poor papa thought it would be such a treat for me to go to the theatre, for once, like a grand lady, in a box on the first tier, but no performance has ever given me so little pleasure as Cendrillon. Papa, when you are ready, I am. If we leave at once we shall be able to get out before the crush begins."

She rose, drew her mantilla close round her tired pale face, then, leaning, for the last time in her life, on Steven Lawrence's arm—Charlie Wentworth, in keeping of M. Barry, in front—left the box. "You return with us, I suppose?" she said to Steven, when they had walked together for a minute in silence. "M. de Vitrou, the Chevalier, and half-a-dozen others are coming to do honour to my birthday;" a palpable bitterness changing her voice at the word "honour."

"I'm afraid I shall have to say good-bye to you at the door of the theatre," answered Steven. "By to-morrow evening I find that I shall be able to start for England, and to-night I must return home early. Ah, Mademoiselle," he added, "how shall I ever thank you enough for your kindness, for the good you have done me during the last three weeks?"

She lifted her eyes, the honest girlish eyes, quite steadily to his. "What does this mean?" she said. "What have you heard about us? Tell me—I would rather hear it from your lips, and *now!* Don't be afraid of hurting me. You will do me a greater favour by speaking frankly than by silence I assure you."

"I have heard," said Steven, gravely, "what concerns myself, and myself alone, and while I live I shall remember your kindness to me with gratitude."

Perfect respect, a great, a chivalrous gentleness was in his voice; but the blood flushed up in a hot tide over Mademoiselle Barry's face. "And papa? Shall you remember papa as you will me? I would rather not be well thought of by any one who would not think the same of him. If I had known you longer," she went on hurriedly,

"I would have told you more of the troubles of poor papa's life—his poverty, his ill-fortune—things that the world will never know, will never take into account ; but you would have believed me if I had told them to you ?"

"I should believe you as I would believe my own soul," said Steven, pressing the poor little hand that trembled on his arm ; "and I shall remember your father simply as I have found him. Of that you may be quite sure."

"Thank you. I have been very glad to know you, Mr. Lawrence ; We have spent some pleasant hours together, haven't we ? Whatever may be true of others, *you* have not been much the worse, remember, for knowing us, and—and"—in a frightened whisper this—"I am glad, more glad than I can tell you, that you are not coming back to our house to-night. If I had dared I would have told you before not to come, but I was too much ashamed, and . . . well, no matter. It's all over now. Papa dear—" they were at the door of the theatre, and as she spoke she quitted Steven, and went over fondly, bravely, to her father's side—"Mr. Lawrence finds he cannot come back with us to-night. He has got some unexpected news, and returns to England to-morrow."

For an instant an expression such as Steven had once or twice already seen at the card-table disturbed the equanimity of the Irishman's handsome face. It lasted an instant only. Then, remembering young Wentworth's presence—touched perhaps by the piteous quiver of his daughter's lips—M. Barry held out his hand to Steven, wished him good-bye, hoped they would meet again ; at all events, if there would really be no time for leave-taking to-morrow ? their good friend must promise to write. Katie was a capital correspondent ; a letter addressed to them, Poste Restante, Paris, would reach them anywhere. A minute later and father and daughter, Charlie Wentworth in close attendance, were walking away, across the snow-covered pavement towards a stand of carriages, about fifty yards distant, down the boulevard.

Steven stood and watched Mademoiselle Barry's figure until it was lost—with a feeling of genuine regret he recognised this : lost for ever—out of his sight ; then turned, lighter in spirit than he had

been for weeks past, and made his way quickly towards Dora's box. And meanwhile, hidden back in the corner of the fiacre, the poor little girl herself feels that her heart is breaking ! Hot tears, beyond her powers of control at last, roll down her forlorn white face ; in a passion of pain she clasps her flowers, Steven's birthday gift, upon her breast. So men and women part from each other every day. To one an acquaintance has been a pleasant episode ; to the other a beginning and an end—a tide-mark, after sinking from whose level life shall stagnate on, dull and sunless, to the end. If, instead of the neatly-rounded reciprocal passions of three-volume fiction, the crude *unfinished* love-stories of all hearts could be made known, I wonder which of the world's imperial libraries would have space to hold the romances that might be written !

Nothing could be prettier than Dot's smile of welcome to her husband when he came round to her box. What ! all going back together to drink tea with Uncle Frank ? How delightful ! How incomparably better than any of those vapid monotonous champagne-suppers she had grown so weary of ! The Phantom and Mr. Clarendon Whyte were obliged to go their own road when the party divided at the door of the theatre ; the former bearing Mrs. Lawrence's excuses to Lady Sarah Adair, who, it seemed, had some kind of friendly reception (was it a rehearsal ?) to night.

“Receptions, balls, what do I care for them ?” says Dot, as she sits by the fire drinking her tea, and believing, from her inmost soul, in this part of domestic virtue that she is acting. “Dear Uncle Frank, this is the happiest evening, *really*, that I have spent since I left Clithero ! Steven saved out of the hands of the Philistines (and M. Barry has a wicked face, Steven ; I watched him particularly through my opera-glasses), and our return home comfortably settled, and everything. I feel that I shall never want to leave Ashcot again, or not for a year at least. Paris is very well. It would be insincerity for me to say I don't like Paris, but home is better. What will Barbara say when she sees us ? I must buy a plain stuff gown for her as I go through London—if I searched Paris I should find no fit present for Barbara—and dear Aunt Arabella ! How good to think

that this day week we may all be sitting round the fire together at the Dene !”

With Mrs. Lawrence in these admirable dispositions, the plans for return were easily settled. Kate, of course, said the Squire, must stay in Paris a day or two longer to see Lord Petres—just allowing Dora time to pack up her thousand-and-one dresses, and say good-bye to her friends ; but there could be no reason why Steven might not start at once in order to have things ready for her at Ashcot. And so, Dot having interposed a parenthesis of regret about her husband travelling alone, it was finally arranged Steven should go by to-morrow night’s tidal train (it would leave Paris at half-past seven, said Dot, thereby proving herself, to every one’s surprise, well versed in the details of Bradshaw), and the rest of the party follow, if Dora’s leave-taking and bill-paying were completed, on Saturday.

“And now,” cried Mrs. Lawrence, looking with a little yawn at the timepiece, and putting her hand affectionately on Steven’s shoulder, “it is quite time for us to go. Half-past eleven ! We must begin to get ourselves out of these horrible dissipated city hours”—she had not got to her bed before three, at the earliest, for many weeks past—“and I must be up early to-morrow to pack Steven’s things. Ah, how strange it will seem to be alone, even for a day, in this big, big Paris without him !”

Mr. Hilliard offered, as a matter of course, to send out for a fiacre ; but of this piece of extravagance Mrs. Lawrence would not hear. Was not her opera-cloak hooded and lined with swandown ? Had she not over-shoes ? had not her extravagance, her foolish extravagance, she was ready to own her faults, already led into more than enough expense ? No, not if Uncle Frank paid for the carriage, would Mrs. Lawrence do anything but walk. It was the *principle* of economy which she meant, from this hour forth, to cultivate. The night was fine, the ground hard. It would be a treat, a treat ! cried Dot, the tears rising in her eyes, to have this starlight walk—the last walk, most likely, that she would take in Paris—alone with Steven.

She hung fondly upon his arm ; she prattled, as they walked along, about Barbara and Ashcot, and how Steven was to have the parlour

arranged (if possible see about that long-talked of piano from Canterbury), and what there must be for breakfast on the morning of her arrival. And all this time the blue and silver dress, the triumphs of to-morrow night, floated like celestial visions before her brain. Fate, she felt, had smiled upon her efforts. She had managed everything excellently. Steven was to go to-morrow, saved by her agency from the clutches of those Irish adventurers ! She would slip quietly off, nobody the wiser, to her ball a couple of hours or so after his departure ; and then—good bye to Paris, and to toilettes, and to Clarendon Whyte ! Good bye to life, and back to Ashcot, where she must try to endure existence, try even to be a better wife to this poor confiding Steven, if she could.

Clinging tight to the strong arm that upheld her, Mrs. Lawrence tripped, as fast as her little feet would carry her, along the frozen snow, thinking all this, yet still not without remorse for the part she was forced to play stirring at intervals in her morsel of a conscience. "If Steven had but been less prejudiced," she mused, regretfully, "had let me accept the invitation openly, offered to go with me, behaved in any way like a reasonable being, how much I should have been saved ? The falsehoods half the world tells are due, I'm certain, if we could look into the cause of things, to the mistaken prejudices of the other half !"

So Dora moralized.



CHAPTER XLI.

LADY SARAH'S MASQUERADE.

ALL the next day she kept discreetly within doors, and denied herself to visitors. How could she care to talk to strangers on this last day her Steven would be with her ? She spoke of their separation as if it were to last for months rather than days ; insisted upon packing his portmanteau with her own hands ; upon seeing to his buttons ; Barbara should not be able to say she had had no time for useful work in Paris ; as evening drew on, came often to his side,

clung to him, kissed him with a warmth that Steven, hereafter, held to be blackest proof of her guilt.

"It was all planned," he would say bitterly. "In heart she had betrayed me already, and, Judas-like, sealed the betrayal with a kiss. A better woman would have had self-respect enough to avoid that part of the business at all events."

And yet Dora, in very truth, throughout that day had no guiltier dreams than of blue taffetas, silver cord, and velvet, in her heart ! Steven was leaving her free, and she was glad ; Steven was being deceived, and she was sorry. And weakly wavering—between these two emotions, she packed his portmanteau, or sewed on his buttons one minute : then clung to him, kissed him, tried to hope, even if she were found out, he would not be very angry with her for her falsehood, at the next ! And then Dot *must* act, in whatever situation of life she was placed ; necessity impossible for a man like Steven to recognise ; must pose, and think of effect, even with no larger audience than herself. Going about from room to room with pale cheeks and straight hair (the hair-dresser was ordered for nine) ; sewing on buttons ; jumping up and down on portmanteaus to make them lock ; embracing Steven ; asking his forgiveness for her extravagance . . . in all this Dora was but enacting her small version of the kind of domestic repentance she had so often seen on the Parisian stage to the best of her ability !

"And what shall you do with yourself this evening?" asked Steven, as she clung to his hand at parting. "Order a carriage, and go round to the Hôtel Rivoli, I hope. You will be moped to death sitting here alone by yourself."

"I—if I feel better, perhaps I may go out !" said Dot, with down-cast eyes. "At present all I feel inclined for is a good long cry, and then to put my head upon my pillow and rest."

In saying which she spoke, for the moment, absolute truth. As tears, however, would have had the effect of spoiling her looks, she kept them heroically back ; contenting herself with standing full five minutes at the window from whence she had watched the *fiacre* bear her husband away through the lamplight ; after this, instead of resting

her head upon her pillow, consigned it to the hands of M. Alphonse, from whence, at the end of three-quarters of an hour, it emerged frizée, gold-powdered, radiant under its little velvet toquet. "Une belle et gracieuse tête de Rubens," said M. Alphonse, stepping back, and clasping admiring hands before his work ; for M. Alphonse was a man of artistic culture. Whereupon, Mademoiselle Aglaë, and the *mœnad* cry, "Oui, oui ! Superbe ! Magnifique !" in admiring chorus ; and Dora's husband, Dora's last faint qualms of conscience are forgotten. The first round of applause, no matter whether from the gallery or the stalls, have reached the ears of the actress, and everything belonging to the world without—the world of actual dull reality, beyond the rouge, and gold-dust, and foot-lights, in which her soul delights—has passed away.

At half-past ten came a ring at the door of the apartment, and Grizelda Long, cloaked and hooded, entered the little disordered saloon, where, three or four minutes later, Mrs. Lawrence joined her.

"Bring in a light, Aglaë," cried Dot. "Turn on the gas, and let us see how we look reflected from all the different glasses. Grizelda, dear, take off your cloak, and let me see you. Oh ! . . . very nice, indeed ! Now, how do you like my dress ? Do you think the most malicious person could say that there was anything wrong in my wearing it ?"

Mademoiselle Aglaë had by this time turned on the gas, and Dot stood directly under its light, before one of the long console glasses which lined the walls of the salon. It would be difficult to imagine a more charming picture than the little creature made, in the long-coveted blue and silver of her page-dress. Her tiny hands and feet, her short fair hair, her little round throat, might have belonged, in truth, to the child of twelve she was designed to personify ; and her face, with its marvellous white-and-pink complexion and lustrous dark eyes, seemed to have gained a freshness, a bizarre grace, under this boyish travesty, that even the critical eyes of Grizelda Long could not but recognize.

"You look very well, my dear ; and of course the propriety or non-propriety of wearing such a dress must, as I told you from the first, depend upon one's own moral sense. I don't know that I

would have worn it myself, but then, you see, my dear mother brought us up *so* austere-ly" (at odd times the Phantom would throw out these vague claims to human kinship) "so very austere-ly—and I myself have such a dread of men ever thinking a woman unfeminine!" And upon this Grizelda's great eyes stole to a reflection of herself in the glass, with an expression of kittenish modesty that Dot took off to the life an hour or two later, with three or four appreciative friends for audience, and Lady Sarah Adair's boudoir for a stage.

The subject of Grizelda's probable costume had been one freely discussed among Grizelda's acquaintance during the last fortnight: Miss Miggs, Mrs. Squeers, one of the witches in *Macbeth*, the *Veiled Prophet*, the *Wandering Jew*: these were a few only out of the varied *répertoire* which Dora, Mr. Clarendon Whyte, and other of Grizelda's more intimate friends had made out for her. And in what costume, after all, do you suppose Grizelda had arrayed herself? As a "*Bergère à la Watteau*"—to use the correct technicality of the milliners. Her sparse, unlovely hair, combed boldly from the gaunt temples, plastered, powdered, surmounted by a tiny wreath of opening rose-buds: her lank arms bared to the elbows; her dress of brocaded silk looped so as to show her poor old feet and ankles; ill-adjusted rouge heightening the angularity of her faded cheeks; a patch coquettishly set at the spot where a dimple should have been—but was not. In this guise was a woman to whom the world was no stage, but bitterest reality—a woman who, with sordid care, must pinch herself for months to pay for all these gewgaws—about to present herself before two hundred and fifty spectators at a Parisian masquerade!

"Your husband is gone, I *conclude*?" she remarked, when—Dot wrapped from head to foot in a cloak—they were driving rapidly along the *Champs Elysées*. "Mr. Lawrence has been able to tear himself from his friends, the Barrys, at last?"

"Yes, he is gone," said Dot; "he left before I began to dress, to go by the half-past seven train, and I am to follow, with my uncle and cousin, in a day or two. Ah, heaven, Grizelda!" she exclaimed, as a horrible possibility for the first time struck her, "if he—if Steven

was to be too late ! He said something about our clocks being all wrong just before he left."

Dot's heart beat quick under her spangled satin doublet. She put her face close to the window, gazing out with a sort of childish horror upon every carriage that passed her on the road. "If—if Steven was to be too late !" she murmured under her breath.

"Well, and what if he was ?" said Grizelda, sharply. At the moment when she and Dot stood side by side under the light, a sense, such as she had never felt before, of Mrs. Lawrence's levity had entered Grizelda's soul. "I hope you don't mean to say you are ashamed of what you are doing ? If Mr. Lawrence did miss the train, and find that you had been to a ball at one of the best houses in Paris, what dreadful harm would be done ?"

"He would kill me, I think. Just that," said Dot. "If he saw me in this dress he would kill me."

"A cheerful suggestion ?" said Grizelda, laughing the Phantom laugh. "My dearest Dora, why in the world didn't you come as Fatima ? It would have been much the fittest character for the wife of such a Bluebeard."

"I wish I hadn't come at all," said Dora. "I wish I was with Steven. I wish——"

But at this moment their carriage stopped before the entrance of Lady Sarah Adair's house. She heard the distant sound of a waltz ; saw the quick-moving shadows that floated to and fro across the windows of the ball-room on the first floor ; and once again Steven, and her own remorse for the part of folly that she was playing, were forgotten.

It was now close upon eleven o'clock ; and, precisely as Marie de Medicis and her page floated amidst murmurs of applause into the ball-room, Steven Lawrence was walking home to his lodgings in the Champs Elysées. He *had* been one minute too late for the train ; an untoward mischance brought about chiefly by Dora's unconquerable emotion at parting from him ; and finding that the earliest train by which he could start would be the Calais mail next morning, had left his luggage at the terminus, and at once walked back to spend the evening at the Hôtel de Rivoli. Dora he fully thought to

meet there, for it was impossible to him to believe in her intention of spending an evening alone and in tears ; but Dora, as you know, had other employment on hand. Expecting, however, that she would appear before long, the Squire made Steven sit down and play draughts with him beside the fire, Katharine opposite them with her embroidery ; and in this quiet fashion, with cheerful talk over plans for the approaching spring at Clithero, the evening passed quickly by. At eleven Steven rose and took his leave. It was evident, after all, that Dora's headache had been no feigned one—evident that she had indeed condemned herself voluntarily to spend an evening in her own society ; and as he walked along the Champs Elysées on his way home, Steven's heart softened at the remembrance of her face as he had last seen it, disconsolately leaning over the head of the stairs to watch his departure ! He thought how he would go in softly to her room, watch that tear-stained face a minute upon its pillow, then hear her childish babble of surprise and pleasure as she awoke and heard him tell the story of his stupidity in missing the train. And even as he thought this, reached the door of his house and gave a gentle monosyllabic ring at the outer bell.

The porter admitted him without question as usual ; and Steven ran three steps at a time up to the entresol, where, after some minutes' delay, the old French servant, sleepy-eyed, and with her cotton handkerchief tied awry on the top of her head, opened about three inches of the door, and peered out at him.

"Monsieur !" she cried, almost dropping the hastily-lighted lamp out of her hand. "*Mais, Monsieur est déjà de retour ?*"

Steven passed by her into the little dark drawing-room, and the *mœnad*, following on his heels, lit one of the gas-burners from her own lamp, then retired outside to listen. Mademoiselle Aglaë was sufficiently in her mistress's counsels to know that Monsieur was ignorant of the projected masquerade. Mademoiselle Aglaë and the *mœnad* had talked the matter over, with freest expansion of sentiment, with amplest gloze of French colouring respecting cause and effect. And now—now it was evident to the *mœnad* mind the catastrophe had arrived ! Monsieur departs on his journey ; Madame departs to her amusement ; Monsieur returns unexpectedly,—“and

puff!" says the moenad half-aloud, and with a little snap of her black fingers, "'tis finished." Would he rage, explode with the got dams the violence of his barbaric nation, or what?

He laid down his hat, walked quietly up to the cold hearth, and stood there. The drawing-room, as I have before said, opened into Dora's bedroom: the door of communication stood an inch or so open; and Steven felt—his senses gave him as yet no evidence one way or the other—that his wife was not there. The salon, as was its wont, bore evidence of having been made to serve as a dressing-room. A tiny slipper lay here, a glove, a morsel of ribbon, a shred of silver cord there; the mingled odours of half-a-dozen unguents and essences made the air oppressive as the air of a barber's shop. He stood still for more than a minute; then, instead of going into the bedroom at once, walked across the salon half-whistling, with his hands thrust into his pockets, and began to examine a picture—he must have seen it a hundred times before—that hung upon the opposite wall. It was a French line engraving of the good old vapid school of Regnault and Vidal. A lady in classically spare drapery simpering, with downcast face, over an open letter that she holds in her hand, while with the other she caresses a simpering lap-dog; a servant-woman looking over her shoulder, simpering; a page, his face half in light half in shadow, simpering at the door; fruits and flowers upon the tapestry-covered table; upon the floor a leash of partridges and a leveret. A picture bearing the name of "*Le Cadeau*," telling no story whatsoever of human suffering or happiness, nothing but the most insipid record of insipid everyday life. Yet Steven stood before it motionless, examined it as if his life depended upon unravelling its meaning; only turned away when the striking of a clock at his elbow told him that a quarter of an hour had already passed since he entered the room. . . . Long afterwards, in fever and delirium, the faces of that lady and page will live before and torture his brain,—just as a tune played on a barrel-organ will torture the memory of a man who heard rather than listened to it in some bygone moment of impending danger of loss.

He took up a hand-lamp from the table, lit it at the gas, and passed on into his wife's room. It was vacant: that he knew. The

disordered state of the dressing-table and floor showed that Dora had gone as usual to a ball : that he expected. Her tears, her contrition over their past estrangement, her resolves for the future, had been so much clever acting—no more. He went up to her dressing-table, left in chaos by Mademoiselle Aglaë, who, immediately after her mistress's departure, had betaken herself to her own engagements for the evening, and there lay, so exquisitely repaired that the effects of his own act of violence were scarcely discernible—M. Valentin's sketch. The hair-dresser had required it as a model whereby to execute his "Rubens' head," and for the first time during the past fortnight, for the first time since the conspiracy was set afoot, Dot had forgotten to put it safe under lock and key before she left.

Well, Steven neither tore the sketch a second time, nor uttered the barbaric oaths of his nation, nor showed signs of violence of any sort or kind. He merely stood—somewhat pale, remarked the mœnad who still followed and was stealthily watching him through the half-open door—pale, and as if he were not quite determined yet what to think or do. As well for *her* to make friends with some one before the crash came, decided the mœnad, half-frightened, half-delighted at seeing in real life the kind of play she had so often peered at through the gallery-rails of the Banlieue theatres : and with a sniff and a cough, meant, palpably, to be one of sympathy, she approached. "Yes, yes, it was indeed like that Madame had departed, like a pretty little young man, as Monsieur saw, and another person had come to seek her, and——"

"Allez !" said Steven ("d'une voix terrible," the mœnad observed, when enacting the scene next day for Mademoiselle Aglaë), and without turning his head. Upon which, muttering and shaking her head, the old woman crept away to her own lair under the kitchen dresser, her own speculations as to what would be likely to occur when Madame should return, and he was left alone.

Alone, Reader, do you know the fullest meaning of that word ? Alone, with only the steepled tongues of the great city meting out, multiplying his loneliness ; with the snow and wind of the February midnight beating upon the window-pane ; with a shame disproportion-

tioned, one may say, to the occasion—what, indeed had the man discovered? that his wife had gone in a dress, more or less indecorous, to a fashionable masquerade—for companionship. One, two, three o'clock struck, but still Dora did not return; and at last, wearied out, Steven left off pacing such limited number of feet as the salon possessed, and throwing himself down into an armchair beside the cold hearth, fell almost instantly into a kind of heavy sleep.

Cold? ay, it was cold indeed, but no wonder. He was camping out with Klaus, and the cries of the goat-suckers told him that the chilliest hour of the night, the hour before sunrise, was at hand. "Take heed by my story, by my sorry bit of experience," said the old man, looking across at him in the flicker of the firelight. "Take heed that the eyes do not lie every time they look at you—that the smile is yours indeed, the hand" "The dress is a perfect little dress, dearest," says Dot kneeling by him, and looking up (Klaus, the dark forest back-ground, still there) into his face; "but of course I would not wear it against *your* wishes. . . ."

And then a great storm rose; and Klaus and Dora were both shut out from his sight. Colder and colder grew the night. He heard a low confused roar, stretched out his hand—with the old mechanical movement, to clasp his gun,—and waking with a start knew where he was. The roar was of the wintry blast in the avenue without: there lay the ribbons, the silver cord upon the table; there were the lady and the page simpering from their frame upon the wall. A sickly minglement of barber's perfumes, not the balmy freshness of the forest side, met his senses.

Five o'clock struck, just now, from the distant city clocks, and almost at the same instant came the sound of approaching wheels, of fast flying horses' feet, down the silent Champs Elysées. A few minutes after and Dot, admitted by the drowsy porter, was tripping, as lightly as limbs, stiff and weary with dancing, could trip, up the stairs, half-singing as she went the last galop that had been played at Lady Sarah Adair's ball. Steven, and her vague fear of Steven's anger, the recollection that this was to be her last Parisian triumph, of the questionable means by which she had attained it—these and all other disagreeable subjects were very far from Dot now. She *had* been

the prettiest woman in the room ; Clarendon Whyte, a dozen Clarendon Whytes, had been at her feet. She could still hear the murmurs of admiration that followed her as she moved from room to room ; could read the story of her success on poor old Grizelda's face as a pair of phantom eyes watched her from solitary corners of the ball-room, or peered down from unexpected eyries about staircases ; could feel the rapture of that moment of moments when M. Valentin, a hundred spectators standing by, had asked permission to take a sketch of her ; "A few lines only—just to remind him by how far the fresh and graceful original surpassed the poor conception of her embodied in his own first drawing." "But I am very willing, if alway, it is worth the trouble," cried Dot, for when she is most interested in her little parts the creature acts them aloud, even to herself. And as she speaks she opens the outer lock of the apartment with her latch-key, skips in, the same expression on her face that it had worn for M. Valentin's benefit ; and with a start of horror sees a bright gleam of gas proceeding from the half-opened door of the salon.

For a moment her heart seemed to stop beating ; then she walked falteringly on ; entered, and saw her husband. She gave a cry and stopped short. "Steven, I—I never meant to go ! they over-persuaded me. Oh, Steven, forgive me !"

He answered not a word, but something in his eyes bade her come up close—close under the gas where he could see her full, and Dora obeyed. She had been a fresh and graceful picture in the artistic sight of M. Valentin ; the prettiest woman present to connoisseurs, English and French, accustomed to the high-rouged beauties of Parisian ball-rooms. To Steven she was hideous. More hideous than any tinsel-dressed ghost,

"With lips as much too white as the streak
Lay far too red on each hollow cheek,"

that had ever made his heart bleed as a boy in the streets of the gold cities. She looked jaded and worn ; her paint most like paint, most unlike life ; her eyes unnaturally large, and with the bluish shade of art horribly visible upon their lower lids. As she approached him the fumes of wine, of punch, mingling with the stale perfumes of

patchouli and mille-fleurs, overcame him with a sense of bodily sickening repugnance.

"I couldn't withstand the temptation. I'll give my whole life to make amends." And she held out her trembling little hands, in their soiled torn gloves, towards him.

"Don't touch me," he said drawing back, but not taking his eyes a second from her figure. And in the tone of voice in which he spoke those three words Dora knew her fate: fathomed not his agony of self-abasement: *that* she could never know: but his scorn, his abhorrence of herself. "Ashcot (in a second that threat of his returned, with prophetic augury to her heart) would be no place for a lady who had gone, in male attire and against her husband's wishes, to a Parisian masquerade!"

"It's done, and there's no use in tragedy-scenes now," she cried, turning from him with a shame that the eyes of two hundred indifferent spectators had not engendered in her, and crouching down on a low stool beside the fire-place. "If you hadn't been so harsh when I showed you the sketch you wouldn't have forced me into all this leceit. However, it's done, and there's an end of it."

"Ay," said Steven slowly, and turning so that he could watch her still; for something in that travestied figure, that haggard painted face, that living evidence—so he took it—of his own sullied honour, seemed to possess a ghastly attraction for him; "it's all over. What is your object, if for once you can speak the truth, in coming back here to-night?"

"I—I think I might ask that question," said Dora, with a sickly attempt at a smile. "What is your object in coming back here to-night? I thought you were half-way home by this time, Steven."

"Half-way *where*?"

"Half-way to Ashcot. Oh, don't look at me so! What have I done that I mustn't call Ashcot home? Take pity on me! I am weak; I have no one but you. What have I done that you should speak to me in such a voice?"

"You have done," said Steven, without a trace of passion as yet, "what I have no doubt is a common enough thing for women in your fashionable world to do; have deceived, dishonoured a husband that

trusted you. You might have done it, Dora," he went on, "might have sunk even to this!" as he spoke his eyes took in every detail of her dress with an expression of loathing I have no words to render, "and yet have degraded yourself somewhat less, I think. There was no need to treble your shame by all the kisses, all the kind words you gave me to-day."

Then Dora lifted up her face and spoke out boldly. "You are cruel, you are unjust!" she cried. "Turn me out of your house—do as you like. I know pretty well what mercy I've got to expect. I know how you turned Dawes out to starve at Ashcot. You have a nature of stone. You can make no allowance for faults, for temptations that are not yours. I did kiss you to-day, I did give you kind words, and at the time I was sincere. Because I have not exactly your Methodist opinions, because I have not exactly your conscience (elastic sometimes), your ideas of right and wrong, I am to be treated as if I had committed a crime. Oh, narrow heart! If you would open your arms to me now, and forgive me, I would be faithful to you till my life's end. You might take me at this moment, at white heat, and bend me into whatever form you chose. But you will not—you will not!"

"No; as God is my witness I will not!" exclaimed Steven, the tremor of rising passion in his voice. "Take you in my arms, dressed as you are, coming from the scenes you come from—you, my wife? No; to such dishonour I have not sunk. I've borne a good deal," he went on, "and till to-night have thought you honest. I'm a Methodist—you are right. I'm narrow-minded, hard, may be, of nature as you say; at all events your life and your associates, and your hours, and everything belonging to you here in Paris, have been repugnant to me. But I've borne with them, for I've thought you honest. 'She would not lay her head beside my pillow, and deceive me,' I've thought, when common sense at times has bade me distrust you. 'Her heart is pure. Her follies are those of a child.' And I've forgiven you—reverenced you; do you hear that? reverenced you till to-night; and it's all over now. You are no more to me than any woman I may chance to meet in the streets. Lead your own life, where—with whom you choose. I shall never blame you again."

"Steven, Steven! don't say that!" she cried, starting up wildly. "Don't say it. You don't know what you say—what temptation you thrust upon me. Oh, I am not wicked. I am not what you think me! I'll go to Kate in the morning and take her hand, and swear, looking into her face and yours, that I have never done a worse thing than going to this wretched ball. It was a temptation to me such as you could never understand. M. Valentin made the drawing look so exquisite, and there wasn't another grown person in Paris, they said, who could fill the character but me; and then every costume in the room was designed by artists, you know! It isn't a question of sentiment at all, Steven, if you would only see it so, but of art."

Steven laughed; a laugh by no means good to listen to. "I've heard a great deal of this tall talk already," he remarked, "and I see pretty clear what it ends in. When I told you that the dresses and the dancing of your Parisian ball-rooms were indecent, I was silenced by hearing that 'those were the usages of the world.' When I warned you against your intimacy with different women of your acquaintance, I heard that people 'whom society countenanced' I had no business to find fault with. I see you, to my shame, in a dress that unsexes and degrades you, and I'm told it's not a question 'of sentiment but of art.' Later on—my God that I should speak of such things!—later on, if I was fool enough to keep you with me, I should wake some morning to a lower depth yet, and be told, probably, it was a question 'not of morality, but of fashion.' No, Dora, no. I wish, heaven is my witness, I wish to do my duty to you still; but the same roof can cover us two no more. Take your liberty, use it as you choose, and forget me! It is the best thing that can happen to us both."

He turned from her, and began to pace up and down the room as he had done while all this was passing through his mind during the silent hours of the night: and his wife watched him. Such a contrast as they formed! Steven's big figure, in the rough morning suit in which he had meant to travel, his arms folded, his head down-bent; Steven with almost a woman's shame upon his pale vigil-worn face. Dot in her male attire, all silver and spangles, the rouge that breaking day-dawn now made more distinctly palpable on her cheeks,

and with unnatural lustrous excitement in her bistre-shaded eyes ! The mirrors giving them back from a dozen different points of view ; ormolu cupids drawing shafts at them from various clocks and brackets ; the lady with her spaniel, the page, his face half in sunshine, half shadow, simpering down with the superior virtue of a hundred years ago from the walls !

Dora was the first to speak. " You tell me to take back my liberty, and forget you. Such words come glibly, are easy enough to speak, to a man. Do you know what they mean to me ? "

He made no answer.

" Perdition, Steven ; just that. I know very well what will become of me." Under all its spangles and gewgaws the wretched little figure shuddered. " Women, like Lady Sarah Adair, who can live away from their husbands and keep their position, are women with money. I have none. *You* cast me away, and the world, yes, the nearest friends I have, will be on your side and cast me away too. Steven, do you know what the meaning is to a woman of those two words, ' cast away ? ' "

" You might have commanded my duty to your life's end, if you had chosen," he answered, but without looking at her, " and you did not choose it. I'll do all that lies in my power for you, as far as money goes, but I'll never have you at my side again. The falsehood, the wrong are yours, and you must bear the fruits of both."

" Falsehood !" echoed Dot, drearily, and as she spoke she walked across to the window, stood and watched the cold day struggling with the lamplight in the leafless avenue outside. " Ay, what have I been brought up to, what have I lived and moved and breathed in all these years, but falsehood ? Steven," abruptly, " from the day I was fourteen, I have been taught that the greatest virtue for me was falsehood, and so I've come to learn—yes, living in the Dene, in the wholesome atmosphere, you will say, of an English fireside—to look upon respectability as a sham (haven't I been a spectator of Arabella's marriage, of Katharine's engagement ?). And now, here in Paris—you won't believe me, I'm condemned, still I choose to speak—here in Paris, amidst frivolity, dissipation, with men and women neither possessing nor pretending to possess high moral character for my companions.

I've seen something nearer approaching to *truth* than I ever saw since I left the borders of the Bièvre, sixteen years ago !”

And upon this—for desperation was on her, the desperation most creatures feel when they stand at bay, hard-pressed, irrevocable destruction lying close beneath their feet—Dora Lawrence told her husband all. Told, not without a certain degree of pathos, the story of her early orphaned years ; of the hard work, the straightened pleasures of her childhood ; of the Mère Mauprat, and the Squire's rescue ; of her stunted girlish years at the Dene. “ And, in my whole life I've never known what love was, but from Kate,” she finished, at last : Steven standing stone-still listening to her. “ Uncle Frank took me to his roof, sheltered, clothed, fed me ; a piece of duty he owed to his wife's niece, of course, but performed with the constitutional skin-deep kindheartedness he would have shown to any miserable stray animal that had come across his path. Aunt Arabella, a religious woman, accepted me—as her cross. Later on, you married me ! half out of pity, half pique, who shall say ? Not a doubt, my conscience is a warped one. Not a doubt, as Shilohite notions go, for a woman in this dress to appear, against her husband's wishes, before two hundred spectators, *is* an unchristian spectacle. To me life, altogether, is such a masquerade that I don't know where righteous falsehood ends, and where immoral truth begins. There, I've said my say. Now, decide for me as you choose.” And, by a quick side-movement, she gained the centre of the room, and looked up, with tight-clasped hands, with eager eyes and quivering lips, into her husband's face.

And Steven wavered. She was not a bad actress, poor Dot, in her small fashion ! Could give sharp enough random pin-pricks at the confusion of right and wrong in human life, which, to larger minds, is the mournfulest mystery of our existence, never a mark for pointed little facile cynicisms. But it was not the acting, not the prettily-clasped hands, the quivering lip : not the shallow special pleading which made Steven waver. Sophisms as to the difficulty of sorting right from wrong, truth from falsehood, were not at all, as you know, within his mental compass. And pretty feminine acting—well, he had seen too much of that since he left the backwoods to be carried away by it, with grim daylight resting on the haggard painted face

and dishevelled stage dress of the actress ! Not these ; but the weakness of his suppliant, called out to all of manhood that was in the man ; just as weakness, forlorn, defenceless, had called to him on that night in Sacramento when Klaus first found him, the victim of his own knight-errantry, in the street. Frivolous, erring, falsehood-stained though he held her to be, this poor, small human creature, who looked up at him with piteous bistre-shaded eyes, *had* all the odds of life against her at this moment ; and he, strong and standing on the safe side, could rescue her, as she had said, from perdition yet.

This, and this alone, softened him. " I can never trust you, never believe in you again while you live, but Ashcot shall be open to you still——"

" Steven ! oh, I swear——"

" Swear nothing," he interrupted her sternly. " Don't come near me !" For, if he would have let her, she had clasped his hands, fallen, a repentant Magdalen (in page attire), at his feet. " I believe no more in your repentance than in your promises—indeed, I've had about enough play-acting of all kinds to last me my life ! Ashcot, I say, is open to you. You have deceived me from first to last, I'll never believe in you again ; and so, as I'm not a man to look quietly on at my own disgrace, I'll trust you no further than I can see you for the future."

" And saying this, and under these conditions, you tell me your house is open to me still ?" cried Dot, shrinking back before the horrible picture that presented itself to her mind. " Don't say it—don't say it, Steven ! Have faith in me, and I may grow to be worthy of you. No human being can do well, mistrusted. Suspect a servant, hired from week to week, and see if he does not soon more than justify your suspicion."

" I had faith in you once, and you deliberately abused it," said Steven, coldly. " A greater wrong committed in hotter blood would not be half as guilty, in my sight, as your premeditated treachery."

" Steven, I declare that you misjudge me. At the last, they overpersuaded me, and——"

" And your dress was made in a day, and the picture from which

'twas taken mended, and Katharine—" for the first time his voice shook slightly,—“ Katharine, in her innocence, made the catspaw whereby to get me out of Paris? Dora, I'm not quite the fool you take me for. I've not been thinking alone during the last four or five hours quite for nothing.”

She stood still ; she wavered for an instant ; then caught his hand, clung to it, whether he would or no carried it to her hot, dry lips. “ I confess everything ; Aglaë and I have been working at the dress, by stealth, for the last ten days. I mended the sketch the very day you tore it, and I did (I'm more ashamed of this than of anything) I—did work on Katharine to help to get you away. Steven, I'm a wicked treacherous creature, if you will, but I have saved *you*, you don't know from what ! Charlie Wentworth lost I don't know how many hundred pounds at the Barry's last night—every one was speaking of it at the ball—and the police came down upon them, and the Chevalier is in prison, and Barry and his daughter have saved themselves no one knows where, out of Paris. And Steven, you *shall* listen to me, Lady Portcullis, a woman noted not alone for prudery, but for propriety, appeared at the ball as the Empress Josephine—classical drapery—much more risqué, I assure you, than my poor little page-dress, and Mrs. Stanhope, the mother of a family, went as Guinevere. Oh, it is not I that am worse than other people ! It is you that are unlike other men ! If you had married any other woman of the world—yes, if you had married Katharine herself, you would not have found her come up to your ideas of what women ought to be.”

“ If I had married a different woman ; if—if—” even at this moment he could not command his voice, “ if I had married a woman like Katharine Fane, I would have allowed her no latitude at all. If you had been . . . other than what you are, the first night that I saw you bare-shouldered in a Parisian ball-room would have been the last. You may be sure of that.”

“ In other words, Steven, if you had loved me you would have held me, as I needed to be held, with a tighter hand. Love me now ! Let this miserable night be the beginning of a new life for both of us. Love me, and keep me out of temptation for the future ! I've told you everything—about the Mère Mauprat, even, and the way I was

brought up—everything. Why can't we resolve to put past errors aside? to love, to trust each other more, and begin our whole life anew?"

Steven turned from her, and paced three or four times up and down the room in silence. Trust, love; the strongest, sacredest feelings of his nature; feelings having their roots so deep within his breast that only death, he felt, could change them; and here was poor Parisian doll proposing, as the people do in operas, to love, to trust anew; to put the past aside (as she would put aside her page costume) because the present happened to be a picturesque situation. The kind of situation at which repentant husband and wife are supposed to fall into each other's arms, and vow, soprano and tenor, a pretty duet of reconciliation and renewed fidelity on the stage.

"We shall never understand each other, Dora; unless a miracle works we shall never love each other; but I'll keep you out of temptation—never fear that. You have been open with me, have told me a history which, if you had have told it me long ago, might have brought us closer together, perhaps—God knows! At all events, you have been open with me, and I'll be the same with you: Ashcot shall be your home now, and till the hour of your death, if you choose to make it so; and, that this scene may be the last of its kind, I'll put it out of your power to disgrace yourself for the future. I, or Barbara in my absence, will watch you well; and when you do leave home it will be at my side. I'm not—God knows I'm not!—influenced by passion in anything I say, but by duty; and you'll find that I shall keep to it."

She stood (day had broken fully now, and the faces of both were quite clear) and watched him steadily. "These are your last words, then?" she said at length. "You will not trust me any more?"

"I will have no more play-acting," said Steven. "I have been jealous—you would call it jealousy, I suppose—once, and I told you before that I was not a man to play at that sort of thing a second time."

"And whenever I leave home it will be with you? and so long as I live at Ashcot you or Barbara will watch me?"

"Yes."

"Ah ! Steven, you are narrow-hearted, you have no sympathy for me or for my temptations, but you act, I believe this, as you think it right to act. When am I to come home ?"

"With Mr. Hilliard and your cousin," answered Steven. "In another hour I shall be on my journey again, and you can return, as it was agreed upon, with them. I don't want to injure you by having all this talked of more than I can help."

"Thank you, dear. You have behaved very well to me. You have given me no blow, have used no hard name, as many a more passionate husband would have done at seeing his wife return home in such a dress ; and (although I, no doubt, have forfeited my right to it) have offered me the shelter of your roof still. Your conscience—that's the word, I think—will never upbraid you. And now—now I am weary, and I'll go and lie down. As you are to start so soon, I suppose this is good-bye between us, Steven ?"

"I suppose so," was his answer.

"You wouldn't kiss me, I dare say ? No, I see you wouldn't. Well, without a kiss, then, good-bye. I never *meant*, remember, to have done anything wicked !" And having thus spoken, the little travestied figure, with its azure and spangles, its gold-powdered locks, and wistful, painted face passed away, like a figure in a dream, from Steven Lawrence's sight.

Alone in her room, Dora takes a scented, three-cornered note from the doublet of her page dress ; cries over it ; reads it again—again—as if all her hope of salvation, poor wretch, were there ! At length, but not until the closing of the outer door tells her that her husband is indeed gone, falls asleep ; the note crushed in her hot hand, and a muttered name, that is not Steven's, on her lips. The curtain has risen upon the inevitable last act in earnest.



CHAPTER XLII.

LORD PETRES TO THE RESCUE.

BETWEEN four and five on the afternoon of this day, a long impatient ring came at the door of Lord Petres' apartment on the Boulevard Malesherbes.

Many men—well-meaning, fussy men ; human creatures weakly troubled about other things than their own immediate comfort—require time to settle themselves after a journey, or other break upon the common habits of their life. Lord Petres, guided only by the admirably consistent philosophy of selfishness, could subside into his narrow little Sybarite groove in an hour. He had been back one day and a half in Paris (after the conscientious yearly martyrdom among his tenants at Eccleston), and already the clockwork order of his serene existence was going on smooth as ever. Piled-up wood-fires, in every room of the apartments, transformed the gloomy February afternoon into light and cheerfulness. Flowers bloomed against the double windows, the great Persian cat dozed peacefully upon the library hearth-rug ; books, papers, the evidence of Lord Petres' morning study, lay on the table. Lord Petres himself outstretched in his easy-chair, was waiting his eyes closed, for the clocks to strike the half-hour at which it would be incumbent upon him to put on his wraps and take exercise ; also, now that Miss Fane chanced to be in Paris, to attend to his courtship.

"Milor," said M. Felix, the valet, coming across the velvet-piled floor, with the slow deliberate noiselessness to which all Lord Petres' attendants had to attune themselves. "Here is a lady who demands milor."

"Give her everything she asks, my good Felix, and let her depart," answered milor, in his plaintive little voice. "After living with me so long, *need* you trouble me about ladies and people who come to the door?" And Lord Petres closed his eyes again.

"But, milor, it appears—I ask milor's pardon, but——"

"Lord Petres," cried the fresh English voice of Katharine Fane, "I wanted exceedingly to speak to you, and as there was not time to wait for you at our hotel, I have come to you here."

Lord Petres rose ! M. Felix, with the quick tact of his profession and nation, conveyed himself silently away, and Katharine, coming up to her lover's side, held out her hand to him. "I've come to you in great trouble, Lord Petres. Papa is out of Paris for the day, and I have no one to consult but you. A terrible misfortune has fallen upon us, and——" And Katharine's voice choked.

It was the first time the lovers had met since the occasion when their wedding-day had been decided upon at Brighton ; and Lord Petres held Miss Fane's hand with gentle pressure in his, then carried the tips of her gloved fingers to his lips. "You are looking better, decidedly better than when I saw you last, or else the miserable weakness of my own state makes me exaggerate the health I see written on every other face. Has the wind changed at all, Katharine ? You do not know. I admire you for your ignorance. Next to actual beauty (I may say this to you, because you possess both) the greatest charm in a woman is perfect health—if our stupid modern notions of refinement would but allow us to think so."

"Oh !" exclaimed Katharine, "I cannot think of north wind, of sickness or of health, I'm in fearful trouble ! What but that could have made me come here to you ? You won't think badly of me for doing anything so outrageously indecorous, will you ?"

"Whatever Katharine Fane does becomes, by the fact of her doing it, decorous," said Lord Petres, taking both her hands, and looking at her gravely. "Why, we may almost regard ourselves in the light of married people already, with our wedding-day fixed, and, indeed, close at hand. Only one thing . . . break the news, whatever it is, gently to me, Kate. I am expressly forbidden to expose myself to these mental shocks. Your poor sister—the General—all my sympathy will be yours whatever the extent of your bereavement. But break it to me gradually. It will give both of us time to collect ourselves." And drawing an arm-chair towards the fire he made Katharine seat herself in it ; then taking his own place opposite, with folded hands, and his white face solemn than ever, waited for her to speak.

"I—oh, Lord Petres ! miserable and ashamed as I am, I can scarcely keep from laughing, when I think how both of us must look ! I have just been to call on Dora Lawrence, and . . . no one is dead at all, you know ; there is no catastrophe to shock you . . . and—Oh, I can *never* tell it like this !" Katharine rose to her feet, and turned her face away into shadow. "And she is gone !"

There was dead silence throughout the room after this announcement. The Persian cat roused slightly from his repose, stretched one

stealthy paw, claws outspread, in the direction of the intruder, then closed his green eyes tighter than before. The ruddy firelight leaped up and down upon the walls, lighting up, in particular, the breakfast-scene of Hogarth's "*Marriage à la Mode*," so favourite a series of pictures with Lord Petres that proof-engravings of it hung always round his study-walls in London and in Paris alike.

"Gone!" he repeated, when three minutes—three hours it seemed to Katharine—had passed like this. "Dora Lawrence gone, and no one dead! Kate, I am extremely concerned that you are concerned, but what is the calamity that has fallen upon us?"

"Oh, Lord Petres, can you ask? But no wonder—no wonder! How should you or any one guess at such a history as I have to tell? Dora has gone: left her husband for ever!"

And now, shading her face so that not a flicker of the firelight could reach it, Katharine's story was told; told with shame that seemed to scorch her lips as she spoke, but concisely, unflinchingly: the divided life that the Lawrences had led in Paris, Dora's growing love for a world in which Steven had had no part—all. "We have come to a pass now where plainest speaking is best," she finished. "No use to gloss over a disgrace that the world will know to-morrow! Steven Lawrence went to England this morning, and I called not an hour ago upon poor Dot, and found her gone—with Mr. Clarendon Whyte for her companion! Something the French servants told me about Dora having come home at daylight this morning from a masquerade—but of the truth of *that* I know nothing. Here is a note from herself that perhaps I need not read—"

"No, no," said Lord Petres, entreatingly. "I have read a great many of them. Such letters are stereotyped."

"And she tells me that they have started for Brest, that Mr. Whyte has a château in Brittany, 'where, far from the world' . . . nay, but I need not repeat such folly. What I have to think of, to strive for now, is to save her. Lord Petres, it will break his heart!"

"No, no, Kate, I think not," said Lord Petres. "It will make him thoroughly miserable, no doubt, but not to any fatal extent. And besides, what have we to do with Mr. Whyte's heart? He has

done it deliberately remember, not even as men marry, from prejudice, or social consideration, but of his own free accord."

"I do not speak of Clarendon Whyte at all," said Katharine, indignantly. "I speak of Steven."

"And Steven loves his wife so well, that the loss of her will break his heart?"

"Not the loss, but the shame—the manner of the loss!" said Katharine, her voice all changed and shaken. "Shame such as we men and women of the world, with our poor conventional ideas of things, could never even guess at. Lord Petres?" she turned, came across to him with sudden energy: "will you help me? I'm going to ask an enormous favour of you: but if you grant it, do as I ask, I will love you, be grateful to you till I die!"

Her lips quivered; the bright blood rose into her cheeks; in her eyes shone a lustre such as little Lord Petres had never seen shine in them before. "You have to command, I to obey, Kate," he answered. "I am not as much agitated, perhaps, as I ought to be by the news; for, really, marriage—it seems an odd thing for persons in our position to be saying—but marriage (a barbaric fossil, imbedded, so to speak, in the strata of advanced civilization) is altogether such an anomaly, that no details connected with it can surprise me. This, however, is less a time for generalization than for the indulgence of immediate and personal feeling. I belong, prospectively at least, to Mr. Lawrence's family, and I am ready to say, feel, or write anything, excepting a challenge—always excepting a challenge—that may be required of me."

"But what I am going to ask is neither that you should say, feel, or write anything!" cried Katharine. "I want you to act—to help me to act—and we have not a moment to lose. Papa is out of Paris; gone to see an old friend at Versailles; and will not be back till late. I have written a few lines, preparing him to find me gone on his return. The train, as far as I could gather from poor Dora's note, by which they were to leave started at three o'clock; I have looked into Bradshaw, and find that it is a slow train, and that if we start by the express at six we may catch them up at the Le Mans station, supposing, I mean, that they wait there to go on by the mail to Brest."

A look of frozen, of unutterable horror crossed Lord Petres' face. "We start, the air charged with miasmal exhalations, the thermometer sinking rapidly, by a night-train to Brest ! You and I—elope—after other persons who have eloped ! And with what object ? My dear Kate, high though my opinion is of your good sense, ordinarily, allow me to question it now. With what object must we expose ourselves to night air, and all the other horrors of railway travelling ? Why, because A. and B. have chosen to run away¹ should C. and D.—people with their wedding-day fixed, almost married people already—run away also ?"

"I mean, if I can, to save Dot yet," answered Katharine, with quiet determination. "Not for her own sake so much (I shall give over talking half-truths now) as for Steven's. He shall not have to endure this last dishonour if any act of mine can turn it aside. I thought, perhaps, as papa was away, and I must travel at night on such an errand, you would rather go with me than let me go alone. I was mistaken. I have asked too much. Good-bye, Lord Petres."

She gave him her hand : Lord Petres held it, and gazed piteously into her face. "Don't be angry, Katharine, and do listen for one moment reasonably. Of course you'll go ; of course I shall go ; of course every one will go—everywhere that you choose ; but listen for one moment reasonably. The thing, I assure you," Lord Petres grew almost animated, "was inevitable from the first. Don't you remember my saying to you at Brighton, that the future of Lawrence and his wife must always, on ethnological grounds, be full of interest ? It was *impossible* they could stay together. As impossible as that an oil-consuming Esquimaux and a pulse-fed Hindoo could sit down happily to a common table. Steven Lawrence, I gather from your account, has been vitiating his digestion—and what a noble digestion ! what an appreciative faculty that man had !—through the course of poison he has been swallowing at cheap restaurant dinners. As the inevitable consequence of an overloaded bilious condition of body, his temper becomes irritable : Madame—and, as regards this, no blame is too strong for her !—appears suddenly before him at daybreak in a masquerade attire. The usual scene occurs : the usual

third person is ready to come forward later in the day ; and the household breaks up. Now, or six months, or six years hence, the catastrophe must have occurred. Even you can't turn aside the course of natural laws, Kate, and as a friend of Lawrence's and of hers, as a friend of everybody's, indeed, I say it is just as well got over now."

"Good-bye, Lord Petres."

"Kate, this is the first instance of positive, unleavened, woman's perversity that I have seen in you. Are they alone ! Have these unhappy persons gone to the wilds of Brittany alone ?"

"They have not. Dora tells me—poor infatuated little Dora !—that Grizelda Long—shame on her ! shame on any woman, I say, who could take part in such a journey !" cried Katharine, her face a-fire, "is with them at present. To save us, wrote Dot, to spare papa and me (as if *we* mattered !) the disgrace of any immediate Parisian scandal, it had been settled that Grizelda Long should be her companion as far as Brest at least."

"Then I say this simplifies everything," said Lord Petres, brightening. "Mrs. Lawrence has, at the present moment, a companion, a chaperon ; and about the future neither you nor I, nor the world, has any right to inquire. The matter, to my mind, is settled. As regards Grizelda Long, your indignation—though it sits well on you, I confess, Kate—is strictly unjust. What would become of us all if there were no Grizelda Longs ? social scavengers, human burying beetles, who, simply through instinctive proclivity, are forced to assist at any unsavoury moral sepulture that may be going on ? . . . Kate, don't turn away ! don't tell me you mean to be obstinate !"

"I mean to start by the six o'clock train for Le Mans," said Katharine ; "and it is now almost five. I sent away the fiacre that brought me here. Will you bid some of your people call another."

Lord Petres, without speaking, rang the bell, which was answered instantly by the velvet-footed Felix. "I start in half-an-hour's time for Brittany. Order the carriage, and have fur cloaks, and wrappers heated."

"Yes, Milor."

"You accompany me, Felix."

"Yes, Milor."

"And tell Duclos I am leaving Paris, and that he must furnish me with meat and wine sufficient for two days at least. Now bring tea."

"Yes, Milor."

"You must forgive me, Kate, for being able to think of matters so trivial to you as meat and wine," said Lord Petres, when the valet had left the room; "but as the period at which we may return appears to be thoroughly indefinite, and as partaking of the national food in a country like Brittany might be fatal to me, I feel it my duty to take precautions. Felix is a faithful creature, and, as you see, devoted to my service; Duclos, of course, I could not ask to accompany me into such an exile; and so the only thing I can do is to take a little food with us, put a cheerful face upon it," Lord Petres smiled drearily, "and call it a picnic—in February! Katharine, dear, I don't want to be sanguine, but when we are married I hope many more people won't run away, or—or if they do run away, and you insist upon my following them, that it will be at a more suitable season of the year?"

A tiny Indian tea-pot, containing such tea as Lord Petres' household alone knew how to prepare, was shortly afterwards brought in; and Katharine (scarcely able to believe that the whole scene could be true; that Dora's flight was not a fable, and she and her little lover actors, as of old, in some marionnette comedy) was left alone to partake of it while M. Felix accoutred his master for the journey. The luxurious bachelor-room, the ruddy fire, those pictures of an unholy loveless marriage upon the walls, the Persian cat watching her through closed eyelids, with concentrated smothered enmity, the clocks and timepieces, a dozen of which at least surrounded the room, each, with its different beat, calling out to her that the time of possible salvation was flying onward, and dishonour, disgrace, becoming momentarily more certain when will every detail of those few feverish minutes pass from Katharine Fane's remembrance!

Lord Petres returned at length; smallest, most unhappy of obedient lovers: hidden up, swathed in wraps, with only a glimpse of a forlorn white face dimly visible beneath a furred cloth travel-

ling-cap. M. Felix, discreetest of valets, stood outside, in *his* wraps and furs, stony-eyed, immovable of feature ; in his inmost heart believing, as Duclos, duly informed of passing events in his distant apartment, believes, that the Meess Anglaise, true to the habits of her class and race, is bearing away his poor little Milor, by force, to be married. After this came the drive through the Paris streets ; through the brilliant quarter of St Antin, with its lamplit thousands of fashionable men and women, fellow-toilers all in the toilsomest search that the heart of man can set itself to encompass—the search after pleasure ! Madame la Comtesse returning from unduly lengthened drive in the Champs Elysées ; Monsieur le Comte starting for bachelor dinner at his club ; mothers with fresh-faced daughters, on their way to the theatres ; occupants of broughams, occupants o hired fiacres, hurrying crowds upon the pavement ; all in fullest pursuit of the same will-o'-the-wisp goddess that none of them, no, not for one hour, in this great Paris which is her temple, shall ever fully grasp. Then across the Seine ; the blood-red lamps, on bridge beyond bridge, quivering down reflected, like illuminations in a fairy scene, upon the silent river ! on through the quarter of grey St. Germain : lifeless as the aristocracy it sheltered once : to the terminus of the West.

They were in time ; with one minute to spare. M. Felix, pushing his way alertly to the sharp-faced female clerk at the bureau, got the tickets. There were a few seconds, a few seconds only, to wait in the well-warmed velvet-sofa'd salle. Then the folding-doors communicating with the platform were thrown open, and a guard, great-coated, comfortered for his two hundred miles of wintry travelling called out to the "passengers for Chartres, Le Mans, Rennes, Brest," to take their places. In another minute Katharine and Lord Petres are moving westward, with a carriage—nay, it almost seems, so scarce are travellers on this February night—with a train to themselves, out of Paris !

CHAPTER XLIII.

GONE ON TO BREST.

THE night had become intensely cold : fine above head, a full white moon shining cloudless : but with a penetrating, raw sensation in the air that made itself speedily felt, even in the artificially-heated well-closed carriage, as soon as the train had left the terminus at Mont Parnasse, and got into swifter motion in the open country toward Bellevue.

Lord Petres crept into the warmest corner he could find, his back to the engine, rolled himself up in his furs, drew a hood over his head and face, and so remained motionless—patient example, if ever one was seen, of an innocent man made to bear the transgressions of the guilty. Katharine Fane took up her place at the farthest, or moon-side of the carriage, and leaning up her face close to the window, set herself to watch. The night was piercing cold ; but the fever of suspense and excitement that ran through her veins made her callous to all external sensation. Far away on either side were fairest crystal lights, transparent mystic shadows—a score of varying effects with every new mile they traversed ; but Katharine saw none of them. They flitted with a shrill engine-shriek past the shining lake and dusky forest of Versailles ; on through once Royal Rambouillet ; across the corn-lands of La Beauce ; and still all she saw was Steven's face : all she thought of was Steven's suffering when the truth should be told him—the curtain raised on this last dark act of his miserable marriage. Nature had got her way, you see : was crying out the naked truth in Katharine Fane's heart, at last ! Never more could she varnish it over to herself after to-night. She had loved Steven Lawrence, as strongly as it was in her nature to love, months ago, very nearly from the first day she saw him ; had loved him till the hour of his marriage ; had had a frozen heart within her breast since—warmed into dangerous, fitful life on a certain night, “ when fields were dank, and ways were mire,” in Kent. It was *not* for Dora's sake ; it was *not* for the saving of the family honour that she had re-

solved upon such a step as this : a step repugnant to her pride, her delicacy, to every old tradition of decorum in which she had been reared. It was for him : for Steven, whom she had loved and wronged : Steven, whose future lot—clear as yonder outspread wintry landscape she could see it—must be frozen and barren from this day forward unto his life's end.

After this fashion mused Katharine, in lonely bitterness of spirit—the moonlight painting, with delicate opal touch, the outline of her drooping head and throat—through many a mile of the first stage of their journey. Lord Petres in the meantime, his head encased in its hood, his feet upon the chaufferette, sat philosophically passive ; regarding neither the beauty of the moon, nor of Miss Fane's profile ; regarding nothing but the comfortable fur-lined wrapper, one inch distant from his own nose. At length the train began to slacken speed ; the clocks from a yet unseen town could be heard through the intensely still night ; and in another minute Chartres Cathedral, clear, shadowless (a spectral frost-palace it looked, rather than a building wrought by men's hands of solid masonry), rose up, silvery-white out of the purple distance.

"A quarter of an hour's stay !" cried the guard, opening every carriage wide, as if he felt a bitter satisfaction in giving the inmates as much share of the cold and fog as possible. Katharine leaned out her head—a wild thought striking her that the fugitives *might* have stopped here ; that Mr. Clarendon Whyte or Dora *might* be among the hurrying muffled passengers on the platform—but the only figure she recognised was that of M. Felix, running swiftly along to secure his basin of hot soup and comforting small glass at the buffet. And now, for the first time, Lord Petres began to stir slightly among his furs ; held down his gloved hands over the newly-replenished chaufferette, which had just been placed within the carriage ; at length cautiously lowering his muffler ever so little from his forlorn white face, spoke :

"You don't mean to keep the door open very long, Kate ? Thanks. I asked, because there is something I wish to say to you, and I could not speak as long as we were in the outer air. I have been working out a rather important theory as we travelled along ;" he rose a

tottering little pyramid of rugs and wraps, and moved himself nearer to Miss Fane ; "and as I have no note-book with me, and my brain, in the present arrested state of my circulation, may be incapable of the effort of memory, should be glad to impart it to you. Would you take the trouble of remembering what I am going to say, Katharine?"

"I—well, I'll do my best," said Katharine, absently ; "but my mind is terribly full already, you know."

"Not full of any matter that need exclude what I am going to say—it is, indeed, but a sequel, a correlative to this unfortunate accident about which you are vexing yourself! My theory is this. Every civilized man of marrying dispositions should be enabled, by the laws of his country, to insure at the time of his marriage—as much for the sake of those about him as for his own."

"Lord Petres !—"

"Oh, I have long held this opinion theoretically," said Lord Petres, with thorough earnestness ; "and my sufferings to-night have brought the wisdom of it practically home to me. Why, when every other mischance of human life can be amply guarded against, should an adventure as hazardous as marriage alone remain uninsured?"

"Perhaps because when a man marries he does not look forward to misadventure," said Katharine, indignantly. "Insure! Lord Petres, only that I know you are not in earnest, I should be very much hurt at hearing you speak lightly of such a subject, and at such a time."

"But I never spoke less lightly ; I was never more in earnest in my life," said Lord Petres, in his thin little deliberate voice. "The discovery of statistical averages has, you know, Kate, established the practise of insurance in every department of life ; and the present unhappy event is a sequence—don't be angry with me!—settled simply by decimal fractions. These calamities fall upon us all personally, of course, but in averages. So many people out of every hundred *must* commit certain actions, and poor Mrs. Lawrence has eloped . . . well, we will say has eloped as 8·7 in a thousand. Domestic catastrophes in the gross are as much matters of fixed law as sound or heat ; as uniform in recurrence as the undirected letters dropped annually into the post office. Then, I say, why not insure

against them? If there is a definite arithmetic of household, as of every other kind of shipwreck, why should not a man spare himself, and still more his friends, by guarding against such shipwreck beforehand?"

"Possibly because human hearts are not calculating machines," said Katharine. "Possibly because love, and honesty, and trust are not, like ships and houses, things that you can buy with the money from an insurance office, in place of those that are gone!"

"All this is merely matter of detail," said Lord Petres, with unruffled placidity. "The idea of matrimonial insurance, like every other social innovation, will require time before it can be brought into form, or obtain acceptance from prejudiced minds. You are prejudiced to the last degree (I don't know how I could wish to see you changed) Kate. Like other enthusiastic people, with minds poisoned by transcendentalism, you would hold it nobler for a man to fight, face to face, with fortune than render fortune null and void by paying a certain yearly sum into an insurance office. And still——"

"And still you will persist in speaking of the nearest, most sacred feelings of a man's heart, as if they were things that could be appraised by an auctioneer! Ah! Lord Petres, if you *could* establish a kind of moral Lloyd's! an office that would insure against vain regrets, vain remorse . . . the whole world would flock to it, I suppose!" cried Katharine, with a bitter sigh, and stopped short.

"And this is precisely what my theory, brought into form at some future day, will do," said Lord Petres. "How can we look forward, Kate? how can we say that in the twentieth century the loss of a man's wife will not have its precise equivalent—whether moral or financial is matter again of merest detail; but an equivalent that shall be regarded by society as his highest duty to accept, and which shall, at least, save his friends or relatives from the kind of guerilla campaign into which you and I find ourselves forced now!"

"Well, I, thank heaven, shall not live to see all that!" said Katharine, wearily. "There's a little, a very little, old-fashioned love and old-fashioned honesty left in the world——"

"Vos billets, Messieurs," interrupts the hoarse-voiced guard, letting

in such a rush of frozen air through the door, as sends Lord Petres back as if by magic, into his place. And upon this Katharine, who has charge of the tickets, shows them ; the door is slammed to ; the signal given ; and again the train rushes out into the night, and her solitary watch goes on.

Insure ! Guard against loss of honour and of love ! She knows Lord Petres too well to take this, or any other project of his, as more than a suggestion for Utopia : a paragraph for the great work which in another generation or two, is to form the basis of a new social code for mankind. Still in spite of its absurdity, there is sufficient flavour of good, prudent worldliness in the scheme, sufficient flavour of the doctrines of expediency held by Mrs. Dering, (and herself !) to give her heavy heart fresh food for retrospect. A matrimonial Lloyd's, a policy that should guard against forfeiture of honour or of love ! Had she not once believed, or listened acquiescent to the belief, that a wealthy marriage would be this, and more than this, to her ? that disappointment, trouble, the vulgar bankruptcies of other women's lives, would be shielded, as by prescriptive right, from Katharine, Viscountess Petres ? Viscountess Petres, who should just have paid a stipulated sum beforehand, her own body and soul, as the price of the insurance. She turns, with a kind of shudder, from the bundle of wraps, under which poor little Lord Petres is working out his new little theory, in the corner—Lord Petres, whom she could have loved so well had the word "marriage" never been spoken between them—and with great tears gathering in her eyes, stares out anew across the desolate country. How keenly the stars that trembled soft above her and Steven in the old farm-garden, shine down in this alien France ! How hard, how utterly remote is the steel-grey heaven ! With what chill significance the telegraph-wires, ready messengers for ever so many human sorrows and human losses, stretch away—away on either hand as the train rushes on ! How everything in this foreign country, this lonely, glittering night, seems to pass before her charged with some mocking likeness to her own future life ! A life frozen, bejewelled, large of scope ; far removed from that narrow strip of English ground, that homely span of English duties in which her woman's heart (no suicidal hand

stifling all of nature that was in it !) might have found amplest space for contentment.

There is only one other stopping-place between Chartres and Le Mans. They have passed it ; are traversing black peat-lands, where not a tree, not a building—where no object, save monotonous rows of turf-stacks, or occasional pool, gleaming, moonlit, out of the morass, can be seen for miles around. At last just as poor Lord Petres' head is beginning to sink peacefully on his shoulder in sleep, the train once more slackens speed : straggling lights begin to appear, then thicken, on either side the line, and Le Mans, with its confluence of many lines, its reverberating station, and well-lighted buffet, is reached. The guard throws open every door down the train, calling out to the score or so of half-starved passengers within, that half an hour's feeding-time is accorded. M. Felix comes up, shivering after his second-class journey, and bears away his master bodily—cloak, wraps, and all—to the buffet, where Lord Petres totters to the stove, with difficulty removes his fur-lined gloves, then, slowly seating himself, looks up, with a piteous expression of entreaty, into Katharine's face.

"Kate," he remarked feebly, "command my services !—command my services in every way you choose ! Are we to bivouac here, or proceed to Brest ? I am absolutely in your hands."

"I believe I have brought you on a wild-goose errand after all," said Katharine, looking hopelessly at all the bearded foreign faces that surrounded her ; "but, if I have, we can only return by the next train to Paris. You keep warm by the fire, and I will go and look in the waiting-room, at least."

And she turned and saw a man's figure, Parisian-coated, cigar in mouth, languidly walking up and down the platform, immediately outside the buffet-door. It was Clarendon Whyte !

A short, quickly-stifled cry broke from Katharine's lips—"They are here—they are here !" she whispered to Lord Petres. "Stay for me—not a moment is to be lost—stay for me where you are, please, out of the cold, and I will go and find out Dora while there is still time." Then, without waiting even for the attendance of M. Felix, she made her way out through the shivering knot of passengers who were waiting for their hot soup or coffee beside the fire ; and, guided

by a porter, walked quickly on towards the door of the first-class waiting-room, twenty or thirty yards further down the platform.

On her way she came across the gentleman in the Paris-cut coat, and looked at him hard. He seemed to recognize Miss Fane at once ; took his cigar from his mouth, raised his hat, just as he would have done in Hyde Park, then went on composedly with his walk. Poor Dora's Brummagen hero was true to the ideal whereby he had fashioned himself to the last. Let so much be recorded of him. To destroy victim after victim by the invincible potency of his charms was simply his vocation ; but he was much too deeply imbued with the spirit of the Coldstream cupids and Cruel colonels who were his prototypes to show aught save the impassive calm of blue blood during all preliminary stages of their destruction. Mrs. Lawrence had elected to run away with him ; and now Mrs. Lawrence's relations had elected to run after her ; and it was really a matter of the most thorough indifference to this dark-souled being personally, whether vice or virtue eventually carried the day. Such, it may be assumed, was the meaning (can commonplace people do more than guess at the motives of heroes so far beyond their sphere of observation ?) which Mr. Clarendon Whyte's Hyde Park salutation and languid continuance of his walk along the platform were intended to shadow forth.

Only two persons were in the Le Mans waiting-room at this midnight hour : one a human creature of uncertain age, dressed in youthful unlooped travelling-suit, in a girlish hat—most dissonant with the time-worn face, the time-thinned locks it sheltered—a human creature circling, uneven-paced, in phantom gyrations around ; settling ever and anon for a moment, and in execrable French and with ghoul-like liveliness reading aloud from the recommendations of patent Tapioca, of Bordeaux blacking, of just-published Parisian sensation novel that lined the walls : the other a small childish-figured woman, veiled, cloaked, sitting, her head resting down wearily between her hands, close beside the stove. Katharine watched them for a minute, unseen herself, through the glass door of the *salle*, then entered softly, walked up to the small woman's side, and laid her hand upon her shoulder :

“Dora !”

And upon this a face—oh, so aged, so altered ! oh, so inconceivably

hardened by this first stage of the hardening downhill road of shame—looked round. “Kate, Kate!” cried the poor little wretch, starting up, “you here?” And she caught her cousin’s hands, clutched them, clung to them, as if to assure herself it was indeed Kate who stood before her at this hour, in this far-away place, not a ghost. “Why, Katharine,” her lips parted as if with piteous effort to smile, “what are you doing in Le Mans?”

“Looking after you, dear Dora!” And now that she stood face to face with the delinquent, none of the righteous sternness she had armed herself with, only love, only fullest compassion, was in Katharine’s voice. “Did you think I would let you go away from us, and never make an effort to save you? Lord Petres is with me. I made out—the first time I was ever clever in Bradshaw!—that you had gone by a slow train, and would have to wait here for the mail . . . and so I came and you will go back with us!” And before Dora could answer a word, she stooped and, just as in the old innocent Clithero days, kissed her. Mrs. Lawrence’s lips were beyond all question unworthy of that kiss; yet were Katharine’s none the worse now, or for ever after, for having given it.

“You—you *understood* my note?” Dot stammered, her face sinking ashamed on her breast.

“I understood,” said Katharine, “that you had lost your senses, that in a moment of folly you were going to exchange life for death, and I am here to carry you back. It is a compact between us—do you remember that night at home, when you were first engaged to Steven, we made a compact, whatever happened—to stand firm by each other to the last?”

“When I was first engaged to Steven at home!” cried Dora; and now she snatched her hand from Katharine, turned from the compassionate pleading face with a shudder. “Have you come to taunt me with these things? What is home—what is—I don’t want to talk of him—what is all the old life to me now?”

“Salvation. Just so much and no more,” answered Katharine. “It is to the old life, to salvation, and away from worse than death, that I have come to take you!”

“Too late!” said Dot, with an expression to break your heart in

that poor unmusical voice of hers. "Go back, Katharine, and never, for your own sake, tell any one you saw me, held my hands, kissed me, here ! I've chosen my part, and I'll play it out—play it out to the last."

While the cousins were speaking, the creature of which I spoke had continued to hover, but with slackened speed, in ever-lessening circles around them. It perched for good now, not a couple of yards from Katharine, and with wide-open eager eyes peered, half-crouching, half-exultant, into her face. Grizelda Long had never loved Katharine Fane, and now, at length, had come the long-coveted moment of reprisal ! "We meet in a very painful situation, Miss Fane," Grizelda paused a little, and took out her pocket-handkerchief. "I don't *suppose* you recognized me before ?—very painful, very delicate indeed. Travelling towards St. Malo, you see, from whence I go to visit friends in Sark ; it chanced——"

"Dora," interrupted Katharine, turning dead away from Grizelda ; the solitary occasion in her life when Katharine Fane offered an insult to living man or woman : "the time is passing, and I must speak to you alone."

"Oh, dear !" cried Dot, looking piteously, first at her cousin, then at her friend ; "of course I'll hear you, Kate, though nothing can make any difference now, and—and Grizelda, if you don't mind, Katharine and I would rather talk to each other, please, for the last time, alone."

"Oh, pray don't let me be in your way !" cried Grizelda, with a sniff of indignation. "It is an affair of which I only too gladly wash my hands ! Don't for a moment let it be thought *I* wish to participate in any family discussions on the matter !"

So saying, she rushed to the further end of the waiting-room, turned a chair round with its face to the wall, and there seated herself ; pretending now and again to wipe tears of Christian pity from her eyes, but in reality—for Grizelda Long's sense of hearing, like all her other faculties, was ubiquitous—not losing very many words of the conversation, low-toned though it was, that followed.

"Poor Grizelda ! She has behaved kindly to me, whatever her

faults may be," began Dot. "Few women would have consented to do what she is doing for me."

"Very few I should hope," said Katharine, with slow distinctness. "Few women, whatever they were themselves, would help another woman along such a road as you have taken now. Dora, we have only a very few minutes left us, don't let us waste them by speaking of anything but yourself. Oh, Dot, Dot! do you know what this is you have done? do you know what life-long misery this is that you have deliberately chosen?"

"It cannot be worse than what I've left," answered Dot. "That is one consolation. The future I have flown from would have been a death in life. Nothing that is before me now can be blacker."

"In short, the loss of home, of respect, of good name are nothing to you? Is that what you would say?"

"I've seen people pretty happy without them," said Dot, a determined sullen look beginning to grow over her face. "And I know that I was very wretched *with* them, which is more to the point."

"And the thought of your husband—of Steven's ruined life, does not touch you?"

"How can I tell it will be ruined? He never loved me. Why should he break his heart over my loss?"

"And for us—papa, me—have you no pity for us?"

Dot turned her head away impatiently. "I tell you it's too late to change!" she cried. "You meant well, Kate. You have acted generously, like yourself, in trying to save me, but it's too late! I can't turn back. The die is cast. In five minutes you and I will have said good-bye to each other for ever!"

"Dora!" cried Katharine, desperate, "you shall never go! I will hold your hands so fast that you cannot leave me. Oh, I spoke to you wrongly. I put weak motives of expediency, of worldly honour before you, instead of the motive which alone is of worth to guide you, or any of us. Have you no faith in Him who holds the issues of all our lives?" said Katharine, very low and earnestly. "No dread of losing the one great love which is so infinitely better worth than all human affection?"

Dora paused for a minute, and miserable though she was, a mocking

half-smile came round the corner of her lips. "If motives of expediency won't save me, neither will theological ones, you may be quite sure, Katharine! I was born a pagan, and a pagan I suppose I shall die. If the fear of a world I know so well hasn't stopped me, you may be quite sure fear of one of which I know nothing will affect me little. Good-bye, dear, *dear* Kate! I see the people are beginning to get into their places already. It hasn't been altogether my fault remember!" And she drew herself away from her cousin's side, and looked across the room toward Grizelda Long.

"Dora," said Katharine, her voice sinking to a whisper, "one thing more. This I think I have a right to ask. What fault have you had to find with Steven from the hour of your marriage until this?"

"Fault? actual moral delinquency!" answered Dora. "Well, none I suppose—what can I gain by telling petty falsehoods now? He cared no more for Mademoiselle Barry than for her father. He fought—yes, Kate, I believe in his very heart, he fought against his love for you. He has been quite honest, quite faithful to his duty. You may repeat this, as my opinion, to every one."

"And yet you betray him! You, his wife, leave him to loneliness and dishonour!"

"I leave him," said Dora, "because while our two lives last, they never could flow on peacefully under one roof. I married him (Arabella's work, that!) in a moment of disappointment, and found out my mistake too late. Difference of class, Kate, however pretty radical theories may sound from your lips, is a barrier impossible to get over between man and wife. Steven Lawrence, with all his virtues, poor fellow, is the son of a labouring yeoman-farmer, not a gentleman."

"And so," cried Katharine, quick, as if those words of Dora's had stung her, "and so you become the companion of Mr. Clarendon Whyte. A curious choice, I must allow! Take your own road—I have nothing more to urge. To escape from being the wife of the labouring yeoman-farmer, you run away with the son of the Oxford Street hatter. I have finished. I have not another word to utter."

"The . . . son of *whom*?" said Dora, growing white to her

lips. "Katharine, do you mean this!—what is this that you are telling me?"

"The only thing I ever heard concerning Clarendon Whyte that was not to his discredit," answered Katharine, icily. "Has the story not reached Paris? It was well known in London a good many months ago."

She turned as if to go; but Dot followed, caught her by the hand. Affection, gratitude, honour, religion had each cried out to her in vain. A chance shaft, aimed without purpose, had found a vulnerable spot in Mrs. Lawrence's soul at last. With this terrible revelation of Mr. Clarendon Whyte's birth the mist had fallen from her sight: the glitter from her hero! Mambrino's helmet, at the unexpected touch of truth, had become the ignoble barber's basin in a second: Dot's ideal was shattered. "Will you swear this to me?" she whispered. "Will you swear to me that this story about him is true?"

"I can swear to you that the story is believed," was Katharine's answer. "Unless it had been pretty well attested, I don't suppose Arabella would have gone so far as to discountenance his intimacy at her house."

A look of blankest despair crossed Dora Lawrence's face. "And for this man, this imposter, my life is to be sacrificed!" she said. "I see it—oh! I see a hundred things clearly under this new light! If you had told me sooner; if I had known it at the very last minute before I left——"

"You would have repented and turned back?" exclaimed Katharine, drawing the little clammy cold hand within her own. "Dot, is that what you would say?"

"I believe I would turn back now," said Mrs. Lawrence, hanging her head, "if I thought any one would receive me . . . and if everything I possess in the world—all my dresses, and my lace, and my trinkets, Kate, hadn't gone to Brest!"

"Trinkets—laces!" cried Katharine, with sudden brightness illumining her face. "What matters everything in the world if we get you back?"

"And you think any one will receive me?" whispered Dot, hurriedly. There was need to hurry; time was indeed flying. The

Phantom, parcel-laden, had already rushed out of the room ; the guard was calling loudly to the passengers within the buffet.

"I know that I will receive you always !" answered Katharine simply and humbly ; "that if the whole world turns from you, you shall be my sister so long as I live." Then, Dot still clinging to her arm, she moved outside the waiting-room door, and stood there—the poor, small culprit trembling all this time like a leaf—while the passengers ran hither and thither upon the platform in search of the different carriages to which they belonged.

"He—he is coming," whispered Dot, as languidly, leisurely, the hero of the adventure came close up to the spot where the cousins were standing. "Katharine, explain for me ! I should never be able to say the right thing with dignity."

But Mr. Clarendon Whyte was equal to the occasion, and gave no one the trouble of explaining anything. "Show me a first-class carriage where one may smoke," he drawled in his bad French, to the guard—was conducted to such a carriage as he required ; entered ; exchanged his hat for an embroidered travelling-cap (blue and silver, Dora's fingers fashioned it out of her own favourite colours) ; then leaned back in his corner, and closed his eyes. This was Mr. Whyte's exit.

As the train glided slowly away Dora stood and watched it, with a face all white and drawn, with heaving breast, with quivering lips.

"Never grieve, my poor little Dot !" said Katharine, tenderly. "Never mourn for the loss which to you is so infinite a gain."

"I'm not—oh ! don't suppose I am fretting for Clarendon Whyte !" she cried, her worn eyes flashing. "I'm thinking of myself. The story will be so ridiculous, and there are my things . . . I can't help it, I *must* think of them . . . there are my trinkets, and my Mechlin flounce, your present ! not even my own name on the cases, and—and every dress I possess in the world, gone on to Brest !"

CHAPTER XLIV.

DORA'S REPENTANCE.

"AT what hour does the next train start for Paris?" inquires a voice in rasping French; such French as surely can only flow from Grizelda Long's lips.

"Madame, in a short half-hour."

"And for St. Malo?"

"Madame, in five hours and a quarter from the present time."

"Bong." But of a truth it would seem that the intelligence is anything but good to the vexed soul of Grizelda; for she continues to hover awhile round the sleepy-faced porter who gave it; then darts eagerly to the extreme end of the platform; then peers, hopeless-eyed, through the window of the buffet; descries Lord Petres within: hesitates, opens the door, coughs, sniffs, and finally makes a sidelong swoop towards the spot where Katharine's unhappy little lover, waited on by all the people in the buffet (courteous French people, privately informed by M. Felix that Milor pays equally whether he eats of their refreshments or not) is "bivouacking."

Grizelda seated herself on the edge of a chair, grasped her parcels together with her numbed hands, and surveyed Lord Petres fiercely. The eyes and nose of a beautiful woman would not be improved by such a wintry midnight as this; neither were Grizelda's. After a time, Milor taking an occasional sip of the Madeira Duclos had packed up for him, and feebly eating minutest portions of cold chicken—"Good evening, Lord Petres!" she broke forth, nervously, for she was not accustomed to hold converse with lords; hoarsely, for during her gyrations outside, the night air had abundantly entered her throat, and given her voice a sound less like the ordinary voice of woman than was even its wont.

Lord Petres turned as much as the collar of his great-coat would allow, and perceiving, not without surprise, the sex of his interlocutor, handed his wine-glass to Felix, then lifted his travelling-cap an inch and a half from his head.

"We meet on a very delicate occasion," pursued Grizelda, but not as fluently as she could have wished. Something in Lord Petres'

salutation seemed to have reduced her to a more absolutely frozen condition than before. "A very delicate, indeed a most painful situation, one may say."

The face of Lord Petres assumed the look of total blankness which, more perhaps than the face of any other man living, it could, when he chose, assume.

"So lately married, and after all her husband's kindness, and such a blow I'm afraid it must be to dear Katharine too. Still, in a certain sense, we have averted much, my lord!"

"Madam," said Lord Petres, with profound courtesy, with awful distinctness, "I am in a very weak state of health, and I have neither the happiness of knowing who you are, nor of what subject you speak. Under these circumstances you will, I feel, pardon my inability for general conversation. Felix!" (in French) "have the kindness to inquire from Miss Fane how many tickets you are to take for Paris. The bureau, it appears, is open."

Felix obeyed on the instant; and Grizelda Long jumped up and followed him out from the buffet. Never in a life that had been one long humiliation, had Grizelda found herself brought to a pass so humiliating as the present. When Mr. Clarendon Whyte, superb, indifferent, had walked along the platform with the intention of allowing Katharine, and Mrs. Lawrence if she chose, to watch his departure, Grizelda—at her wit's end, bereft of her luggage, her very travelling ticket in Clarendon Whyte's pocket—Grizelda, I say, agitated, forsaken, had intercepted his path, and sought to throw herself upon his compassion: "Most embarrassing circumstances. Katharine Fane had arrived, Mrs. Lawrence it seemed was going to stay, and where—where was she, Grizelda, to go?" The suggestion, however (two short monosyllables), offered in reply by Mr. Whyte, although thoroughly characteristic of the order of knighthood to which he belonged, was of no present or practical value to Grizelda Long. So, after various desultory flights—once perching herself in the guard's carriage among the mail-bags; once alighting, ticketless, in a compartment full of recruits, from whence she had to be forcibly dislodged by a sergeant—the poor Phantom was at last left stranded: driven to and fro by porters; her parcels strewn around upon the

platform ; her wide-open eyes looking not very unlike two signal-lamps of distress, as the train passed Brestward from the station. A dishevelled, abandoned Phantom ! with scanty supply of money in her pocket, with no one wanting her, with only the tender compassion of buffet waiters and railway officials upon which to throw herself—compassion in no wise to be won either by flattery or fear, the weapons wherewith Grizelda Long habitually fought her way through life. She flew, desperate, from length to length of the building, espied Lord Petres ; fell upon him with the result that we have witnessed ; and now, one last hope kindling in her breast, was following the steps of M. Felix in the direction of the waiting-room. The changed aspect that affairs at present wore, the thought of Dora's rescue, of Katharine's victory, of Lord Petres' presence and treatment of herself, had awakened all the spaniel attributes of Grizelda's plastic nature ; and she was ready, nay desirous, to fall at the feet of every one of them severally and ask pardon ! A little management, a little exercise of her accustomed tact, she thought, and Katharine Fane would surely allow her to go back with them to Paris—second class ; with the valet ; any way—only go back ! And the real share she had borne in the elopement would be hushed up ; and the credit of Mrs. Lawrence's salvation transferred, by a little dexterous manipulation of truth, to herself. She waited for a minute ; pierced anew by the draught that eddied with such icy persistency down the station ; watched M. Felix running quickly back towards the buffet ; presently saw the two cousins, Dot hanging closely still to Katharine's arm, come out upon the platform.

Now, if ever, was the moment for an attack, and Grizelda made it undaunted. "I—oh dear ! I *am* so thankful !" coming up with a rush, and endeavouring to seize Mrs. Lawrence's hand ; "Dora, this is indeed more than I could have hoped !"

Dora hesitated for an instant, then—"I'm sure I don't see what cause you have to be thankful !" she said peevishly. "If it hadn't been for you I would never have started at all. You know it—I don't want to talk to you. It's very cold, and I can't keep standing here."

"Dearest Dora——"

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't ! I have had enough scenes of all kinds ! If I had been dear to you you wouldn't have helped me on to this." And Dot pressed her hand closer on Katharine's arm.

"And you mean to leave me here, then ?" gasped Grizelda. "You refuse me your protection back to Paris ?"

"Protection !" cried Dot. "Well, really, can't you protect yourself ? The train is long enough to hold everybody, I suppose. I thought you were going to stay with old friends in Sark, or somewhere ?"

"Miss Fane," said Grizelda, turning with deprecating submission to Katharine ; "I appeal to your well-known generosity, to your sense of honour and of right. Is this the way in which I ought to be treated at the last ?"

"My sense of honour and right can matter nothing," Katharine answered frigidly. "Honour and right have had nothing to do with the position you have made for yourself. Dora, dear, let us get on our way. You must not stand longer in this biting air."

They walked on to the buffet, where Lord Petres received Mrs. Lawrence exactly as he would have received her on the most common-place occasion of life ; then stood beside the stove drinking the tea M. Felix had prepared for them, while a ring of attendants, male and female, of the buffet, gazed at them in respectful admiration. Who but English Milors would travel from Paris on a winter's night like this, drink their own tea—paying four times its worth to the proprietors of the buffet—then return, without as much as seeing the Cathedral and the Mairie ? Who like English Milors for circulating money, purely and simply for the sake of circulating it ?

So think the buffet people. All this time a woman, jaded-faced, with battered hat, with feather out of curl, is once more looking through the window, speculating, hesitating whether she shall make a last effort, go in and beseech them all in a body to be friends (and Grizelda's heart does so yearn to be friends with a living lord !) or not ?

"Katharine," said Lord Petres at last, "are witches abroad to-night, I wonder, or are fatigue and weakness only evolving ocular illusions before me ? Who and what, in God's name ! is this apparition that for ever starts up before my sight ?—bat-like, ubiquitous,

yet endowed with the awful gift of human speech. It has assailed me once already, and now, unless my eyes deceive me, is preparing for instant descent again."

Katharine turned round towards the window which Lord Petres was watching. "The apparition is Grizelda Long," she said. "Grizelda Long, who finds her journey cut suddenly short——"

"—And who is rather embarrassed how to get on to Sark!" added Dot, with a cruel laugh. "Oh, that woman! what punishment would be too bad for her?"

"Embarrassed to get on to Sark?" repeated Lord Petres, in his syllabic matter-of-fact way. "Is there really any matter of embarrassment as regards money, do you suppose, Kate?"

"If there is, it is not our business," said Katharine, with bitter emphasis. "Grizelda Long came here of her own free will; let her get away as she can. Whatever befalls her will be a just retribution!"

But Lord Petres thought otherwise. Men have such different ideas from those of the best, the tenderest women, on occasions like this. Grizelda Long was old, her face not fair to look upon, her tongue loquacious—and, on the score of loquacity, an objectionable human creature, to be quenched, as he had quenched her. But she was a woman, stranded at this hour, alone, forlorn, and, from all accounts, money-less. And Lord Petres' hand, by simplest mechanical movement, went to his pocket.

"I may as well ask her the question, at all events," he remarked, and walked out straight—his small figure was fur-encased again, ready for the journey—upon the platform.

Grizelda made the errand he wished to accomplish quite easy for him. "I must really appeal to you, my lord! Dora and Katharine don't see things as I do, and I dare say they are right, and I'm quite ready to apologize, and explain to them and to you, my lord——"

"Oh, please don't!" cried Lord Petres, as well as he could speak through his mufflers. "You will excuse me, I'm sure, on the plea of my wretched health, for keeping my head covered? There has been a misconception, it appears—please *don't* explain! I am without an opinion in the matter—and everybody is going a different road to

what they intended. You, as likely as not, have got separated from your luggage. So, pardon me for asking you, may I be your banker !”

“My lord——” uttered Grizelda.

“I find,” taking out his pocket-book, “I have very little money with me, half a dozen or so Napoleons, and, fortunately, a ten-pound Bank of England note. Will this be of any use ?”

The gold-pieces glistened pleasantly in the lamp-light ; the sound of the English note was crisp, deliciously crisp, in Grizelda’s ears. “Of—of course I’ll pay you back,” she stammered, taking out a well-worn, very empty purse.

Lord Petres put the money into her hand ; then with courtesy as thorough as he could have shown to a duchess, bowed himself away from her thanks. The whistle had sounded, the lights of the approaching engine were already visible in the distance, and in three or four minutes’ time Dot, looking back from the departing train, saw the last of Grizelda, as she still stood (regretting possibly, now that it was too late, that she had decided for Sark, not Paris) outside the buffet.

“And so ends that part of the play, then !” Mrs. Lawrence thought, sinking back into the corner of the carriage. “Upon the whole earth *can* there be another women so hopelessly miserable as I am ? Don’t talk to me, Katharine !” she bent forward and whispered, “I’m not ungrateful to any one, but I can’t talk. I’m worn out, I think. If I can, I’ll sleep.”

Then, resting her face down on the arm of the carriage (deadly pallid the small face looked in the mixture of lamplight and moonlight), Mrs. Lawrence closed her eyes, and began to commune with her own soul. Excitement was over now : hopes, fears, as to the wearing of the blue and silver ; the intoxication of the masquerade ; the scene with Steven ; the conflict in which she had been ignobly conquered ; her flight ; her rescue ;—all over. The dead quiet of repentance had set in : repentance not as a theatrical pose, a picturesque half-hour’s attitude, but a blank uphill road, to be trodden through all future time at Ashcot—if, indeed, Steven would take her back to be his wife there. Oh, bright Parisian hours ! oh, murmured flatteries ! oh, throng of worshippers, with opera-glasses all uplifted to

one *mignonne bébé face*—had she indeed quitted them for ever? Was that masquerade the last, the very last delight she was to know in this nether world? If they had let her sink, irrevocably, into the lost life whose portals she had so nearly crossed, had her prospects for the future been as utterly dark as these? The return to right, to virtue, had seemed tolerably easy in that first moment of indignation against her low-born betrayer—that first moment of reaction, in which love, that was not love, had veered so quickly round to hate; easy, with Katharine's voice pleading, with the theatrical colouring of the whole situation to lead her on. It seemed appalling, more than she could live through, now that she began soberly to think out—here, on her way to Ashcot—the details of what right and virtue, for her, would mean! For it was but a morsel of a conscience, mind, wherein Dora's "repentance" went on! A conscience from which, by very paucity of space, larger temptation, or larger remorse, was excluded! A conscience where, even in a moment like this, the forfeiture of ball-dresses and gold powder, of well-dressed partners and scented pink notes, was, in reality, the dread that reigned supreme!

After a time she slept, and continued asleep or dozing for two or three hours. When at length she woke,—came back, with a shiver, to remembrance of the present, from some dream of bygone butterfly enjoyment,—day had already broken. They were once more passing through Versailles. Dora looked round the carriage, and saw with relief that the eyes of both of her companions were closed; that no one was watching her in this first moment of awakening to her changed life! Instinctively rather than because she could really care how she looked, she took out a small travelling-glass from her pocket, and began to arrange her hair, and dress; then, seeing how white, how old, how ghastly a face looked back at her, shut it up with a sort of groan, and commenced gazing out disconsolately at the country as they passed along.

Early February though it was, on no morning of August could the world have looked brighter than it did to-day. Serenely golden the full moon shone yet, a star beside her, in the south, while all along the Eastern horizon the cold pure flush of day was momentarily deepen-

ing. Every skeleton oak-leaf, every delicate fir-needle in the plantations bordering the line, was crusted thick with hoar frost. Hoar frost lay in fantastic pathways along the exposed ridges of the orchards. The smoke, already rising from cottage and farmhouse hearths, floated in ash-coloured rings upon the quiet air. It was a morning, in spite of latent damp and a thermometer at 30°, to cheer the heart with its freshness, the promises it seemed to yield of coming spring! But nature, as you know, was never more for Dora than a background, a setting to her own immediate joys and miseries. This flushing sky, these rime-enamelled leaves, this blending of night and day, of winter and spring-time, to her spoke one word—country! That summing-up of human desolation, that Siberia, away from Paris, from London even, in which the remainder of her days was to be sacrificed.

She was still gazing, hopeless-faced, through the window when the train stopped just outside the Mont Parnasse station for the collection of tickets. "Courage, Dora, courage!" whispered Katharine, kindly. "Don't look so down-hearted—remember all you are returning to in England."

"That's the very thing I *am* remembering," was Dot's answer. "Do you think I should feel as I do if I was going to stay in Paris?"

On quitting the terminus Lord Petres, by this time more dead than alive, went off, at Katharine's desire, direct to his own house, and the cousins started alone in a fiacre to the Hotel de Rivoli. It was seven o'clock now, and in this old-fashioned quarter of the town the whole population of the town seemed already astir. Priests hurrying to early mass, ruddy milkwomen from the country, bakers standing pale-faced at the doors of their shops, workmen in blouses issuing from the cheap cafés where they had been breakfasting on their road to work—Dot looked out with listless curiosity at them all. "I haven't seen the streets at this unearthly hour since I was a child," she said. "Who would believe we were in Paris? How chill, how hideous, how exactly alike life must be, here or at Ashcot, to people whose only pleasure is to perform their duties faithfully!"

As she spoke, the fiacre made an abrupt turn from the regions of narrow overhanging streets into one of the broad quays that border

the Seine, and modern Paris—fairer, surely, at this hour than any city in Europe—lay before them. Paris without a shadow ! a picture painted all in vivid chromes, in subtlest pinks and violets, column and dome and palace-roof rising white against the sky ; the lamps still quivering reflected on the cold green river ; the pearly, vapourish crimson of the February sunrise floating over all. “ And to think I’ve lived my last here ! ” said Dora, turning away from the window. “ Paris—dear, dear Paris ! Whatever my guilt has been, my punishment will be an adequate one, for I shall lose *you* ! ”



CHAPTER XLV.

HER CONFESSION.

ON arriving at the Hotel de Rivoli the first face they saw was Mr. Hilliard’s. Katharine’s few hurried lines had been at once so contradictory and so blotted that the poor little Squire, up to the present moment, had come to no definite conclusion as to who had run away with whom ! All he knew was that there *had* been an elopement ; and on the strength of this knowledge he had thought it his duty to sit up all night (for Mr. Hilliard was a man guided strictly by precedents, and when his sister Olivia ran away with the curate, thirty years ago, he remembered how no one at home took their clothes off for two nights). “ My Kate, my poor children ! ” he cried, running out, bare-headed, across the pavement to meet them, and looking back into the empty fiacre for possible delinquents. “ What, alone ? ”

“ Alone, papa, and too cold and tired to speak,” said Katharine, hurrying Dot past the open-eyed waiters. “ You will not see Dora again till this evening—for we mean to start, please, just as we intended ; but as soon as I have made her warm and given her some breakfast, I will come down and tell you everything.”

And then—for she was no lukewarm Samaritan—Katharine took the poor forlorn runaway whom she had rescued to her own room ; with her own hands kindled a blazing wood fire ; ordered breakfast

—taking it in herself at the door that not even a servant's eyes should give Dora pain—waited on her ; chafed her cold hands ; took off her wraps, tried to show by every delicate sign her heart could prompt, that they were sisters, not a remembrance of Dora's misdeeds between them ! Natural affection, the inalienable bond of a youth spent in common, disposed her doubtless to this charity ; but beyond, deeper, tenfold, than all other feeling was the hope that, by extending forgiveness to Dora, she might ward off disgrace from Steven. That the world—poor Katharine !—might mete out shame to him in inverse proportion to the forgiveness, the tenderness she lavished upon his wife. “You have been saved, have saved yourself, Dot,” she said, as Dora, rigid and tearless, was sitting, her untasted breakfast at her side, before the fire. “Don't look so miserable. If we are to be judged by our intentions alone, which among us will be saved ?”

“Saved !” repeated Dot, with something of her old mocking spirit, “and for what, I wonder,—this world or the next ? No breakfast, thank you ; I never eat till eleven ; they may bring me my chocolate, and a brioche then. Kate !” opening her tired eyes wide.—“I wonder if there *is* another world after this or not ?”

“Oh, Dot !” cried Katharine, “don't wonder on such a subject—believe.”

“Wonder—believe !” repeated Dot ; “and what is that but a different way of saying the same thing ? What are words but so many vowels and consonants, to which every one puts the meaning that suits him best ? Now disgrace (I'm disgraced, of course ; I don't want to argue the point for a moment), but what an arbitrary term it is ! How dependent upon position, money, the accident of being a man or a woman—upon anything, indeed, except the action that has incurred it ! Sitting here and looking in the fire, I see my whole future life spread before me ; miserable if Steven does not take me back ; more miserable still if he does. And in my heart I don't feel more wicked than I did the day before yesterday ! I don't see that I am worse than any of the women I know whom better fortune has kept from being disgraced. Some one must be a loser in every game, I suppose, and you can't tell which side of the table

is the wrong one till you have tried it. Well, you or another! Where's the good of complaining? You've had the excitement of the play, and must put up with being beggared!" and Dot laughed, the saddest laugh, thought Katharine, that it had ever yet been her lot to listen to.

After a few minutes she went on again. "It began long ago—we may as well talk about it as sit silent—yes, as long ago as Ashcot, but until yesterday morning I would as soon have thought of cutting my right hand off as of leaving Steven; I swear that. Before I married him you know I liked Clarendon Whyte. I don't suppose I was in love with him. I don't suppose I could be in love with any one. But Clarendon Whyte suited me. Until Arabella turned his foolish head he liked me. Well, then Steven Lawrence appeared on the scene; Steven Lawrence in love with Katharine Fane's picture, and come all the way from Mexico to marry *me*. We needn't dwell on that time, perhaps?"

"No," said Katharine, her face sinking down between her hands. "No need to dwell on anything that is past now."

"I didn't deliberately accept him knowing I could never like him as I could like Clarendon Whyte," went on Dot, "or I might feel guiltier than I do. I accepted Steven, I married him, believing the past to be over, and Clarendon Whyte engaged. That, again, was Arabella's work. May she be rewarded for it! Well . . . let me try to tell the story in order . . . You remember the first time you ever visited me at Ashcot? You told me Mr. Whyte was at Brighton, as intimate as ever with the Derings, not married, nor thinking of being married; the story had been a 'mistake' of Arabella's. Think if my heart was bitter that night against her, against Steven, against the whole world! Next day I wrote him a note, a line or two—any one might have seen it—directed to his club in London, congratulating him on his engagement, and saying that we should hope some day to see him and his wife in Kent. For a fortnight no answer came; the fortnight you and Steven used to ride and be so much together—Steven's only happy time, I know, since his marriage."

"Oh, Dora, what good can be done by saying all this now?"

"There is no good to be done by anything, I know," answered

Dot ; “ but before execution the worst criminals of our religion are allowed to confess themselves, and as you are the most merciful confessor I shall ever get, I choose to make my short shrift to you now. For a fortnight no answer came from him—I suppose that was about the time when the latter story became known—then he wrote me a letter, heart-broken ! from Paris. He had never had a thought of marrying ; he had never ceased to think of me ; had considered, although no definite promise had ever passed between us, that we were engaged ; had been driven to despair by hearing of my marriage, et cetera . . . Well,” went on Dot, with a slight quiver of the lip, “ I *was* moved, I *was* made miserable by that letter (it was a day Steven was very late, I remember ; Uncle Frank’s horse went lame, or something, and he had to take you home), and I read it over and over again through that wretched afternoon, and felt how unjust everything was, and—and forgave him for writing to me in the same sort of way he used to write to me before I was married.

“ That night I made Steven promise to go to Paris ; don’t look so surprised ; not on the strength of Clarendon Whyte’s letter, though I did almost read it aloud to him by mistake, but on one I had had on that day from Grizelda Long. Ever since I came home a kind of fever possessed me to go to Paris, before the damp and horrors of Ashcot killed me outright, and I had written to her about lodgings. Next day I walked over to the Dene. Do you recollect it was Sunday ? Aunt Arabella, very cross over Sunday books, told me to look above, not out of my own house, for support ; and Uncle Frank would not hear of Paris ; and you—poor generous Kate !—came to the rescue and lent me a hundred pounds of your own money to help me,—and the thing was settled.

“ We came, and I and Clarendon Whyte met. Katharine, you needn’t turn your face aside. You needn’t be afraid any story of high-flown guilty love is coming. I’m not so wicked as you think. Love has had nothing at all to do in the matter. I met Clarendon Whyte, and I liked to be seen with him . . . Even now I can’t help thinking he was the best-looking and best-dressed man in Paris ; This dreadful Oxford Street story was not known,—and I could see Lady Sarah Adair liked him ! there—the secret is told ! Lady Sarah

liked him, and flattered though he was by her preference, I said to myself she should *never* take him from me! And I kept my word."

"And for this!" exclaimed Katharine, "for a feeling of vanity like this you were prepared to sacrifice your life."

"Kate," said Dot, quietly, "we women, it seems to me, sacrifice our lives every day; for vanity, for money, for distinction; for anything, everything but love! Out of all the ruined lives that are being lived out in the world, I should like to know what proportion were brought to ruin by love. One in a thousand, should you think? I was resolved not to be conquered by Lady Sarah; I liked to be talked about. 'Clarendon Whyte is the Bébé's shadow.' It amused me to know that the people who saw us together said this: 'And she cares as much for him as for the worn gloves, the faded bouquet she flings away when the ball is over.' Love? Why, Kate, have I had time to think of love? Should I have been contented with my toilettes and my drives, and my partners, if I had had anything very guilty on my conscience?"

"I'm sure I can't say," answered Katharine, as Dot thus indignantly repudiated the one feeling which might have pleaded, not an excuse, not a palliation, but a human intelligible reason at least for her betrayal of Steven. "I should have thought, perhaps, something stronger than the wish to be spoken of, or even of out-rivalling Lady Sarah Adair, might have been wanted to make you forsake your husband's side."

"And so it was, something very much stronger than either," answered Dora. "I'm merely giving you the reason why, up to a certain point, I received Clarendon Whyte's attentions. Until yesterday morning, as I told you, I would have cut off my right hand sooner than have left Steven. The reason that drove me from him was fear! Yes, Kate, simple, cowardly, personal fear. I was standing on the brink of danger, if you choose, already. Standing where any accidental push might send me down. The hand that gave that push was Steven's—I swear it, the same as I would swear, dying. You've heard—I told you down at Le Mans—how I went to that masquerade (ah, Kate! what hurts my conscience most is to think I deceived you, made you, innocently, play a part in it all). - Well, I told

a hundred falsehoods, at least, to get there unknown to Steven. I acknowledge everything. I say the dress I wore was one of which he had expressed his horror, that it was an unfit, an unwomanly one ! I say all this—but I say one thing more. When I came home, as I walked up the steps of our lodgings—for the last time, by-the-by—I had no guiltier thought than of the delightful evening I had spent, and of how admired I had been . . . by artists, Katharine ! of course everything's over, now ; but mine *was* the success of the evening—sky-blue and silver, and a dear little velvet toquet, with a white feather, and in the middle of the evening M. Valentin asked to make a sketch of me, and the Prince N—— invited me for three dances . . . very likely, was it not, that I should be thinking of running away with Mr. Clarendon Whyte at such a time as that ! I came home, I say, thinking of the ball—singing, poor fool that I was, and I pushed open the door—and, as you know, saw Steven.

“I deserved reproaches, suspicions ; no doubt of that. I deserved to be told that of my own free will I had forfeited my right to return to Ashcot—‘the roof, thank God ! that had only sheltered honest wives hitherto.’ I deserved, I got all this, and more. Katharine, what will you have ? When he stood before me, not in a passion so much as in a rage of disappointment—of disgust too deep for passion—I admired him ! If I had been a man, I thought, I had felt, had acted the same. It pierced my heart when he told me I might choose what life and associates I liked, so long as life and associates were apart from him, for the future. It hurt me like a blow when he spoke of the trust he had had in me, the reverence—he used that word—the *reverence* that, in spite of all my follies, he had held me in till now. I took his hand ; I clung to him ; I even told him the history of my life before Uncle Frank found me. I besought him to have mercy upon me, and to let me begin my life anew.”

“And he turned you away from him ?” cried Katharine, with kindling eyes. “Steven Lawrence turned you away from him when you made this last appeal to his pity ?”

“No,” answered Dot : slow and measured her voice grew at this part of her confession. “He did what was worse than turning me away from him. If he had only done that in the passion of the

moment, I might have gone straight to you and Uncle Frank next morning, and have been saved. He told me that Ashcot should be open to me still! I should live there—if you had seen the expression of his face as he said this! suspected, watched, if not by him by his servant; should have no further possibility, mark that, no possibility of misconducting myself to my life's end. . . . The remainder of my days I should spend, on sufferance, in my own house for a prison, my husband or, in his absence, his servant, for my jailer. This was his last determination; and upon this I left him. Shall I tell you with what feeling, Kate? the same feeling of trembling, sickening fear I used to have of the *Mère Mauprat*, when she would threaten to shut me up on bread and water for having got away to the theatre or dancing-gardens without her leave. I've no courage. I've a heart as small as my body. The thought of Barbara watching me, of Steven with that look upon his face that I had seen awhile since, frightened me as if I had been a child of twelve yet. Where was the good of repentance, if this was all that was to reward me, I thought! And then I took a note Clarendon Whyte had given me as I left him: a note I would have held over the candle, have valued at its true worth at any other time, and read it, and cried over it, till I fell asleep. When I got up, towards mid-day, Steven had been long gone. I began my packing (weary and heart-sick though I was, I really meant to return with you and Uncle Frank still), but my hand shook so I couldn't get on with it. Then I told Aglaë to put up my dresses for me, and I went into the salon, and by-and-by, Clarendon Whyte came in.

"I was heart-sick, disgusted with everything, alone—what evil chance made you visit me so late that day?—and when he told me he would care for me always, I couldn't help listening to him. He was exquisitely dressed, I never saw him look so handsome, and he had brought me some violets—here, I have them, dead, in my belt!—and he made me confess all about my quarrel with Steven, and prayed and besought me to give up such a 'savage of a husband,' and go away with him. I could do nothing but cry for a long time, for he *would* talk about this château in Brittany, that Lord Some-one had lent him, and it seemed to me it would only be flying from one

desolation to another to go there. But at last, when he said he would take me to Italy, where I should have a chance of getting strong, and where people are visited, no matter what they have done at home, I began to hesitate. 'If we had only money,' he said, 'years of happiness in the South might be before us.' And then I told him I had control over a thousand pounds of my own, and he got more in earnest than ever, and repeated—you know how he can repeat poetry!—that piece of Shelley's 'Epigram,' 'Epitaph,'—never mind what—the piece with a long name, and all about an island in the Ægean, and books, and music, and solitude, and I told him, at last, if it was not for the sake of disgracing you, I thought I would go. I felt very wretched. The prospect of being alone with him, at a château in Brittany, or on this island with the music and books, were both equally dreary, and of course I felt, too, that I should have lost my good name and all that for ever. Still, even this seemed better than to return to Ashcot and Barbara, and then, just when I was wavering, when a word would have decided me either way, came a ring at the bell, and I heard Grizelda Long's voice talking with Aglaë outside. I jumped up; I wanted to escape to my own room, for my eyes were red, and I didn't choose any one belonging to the old life to see me any more: but Mr. Whyte would not let me go. 'My friend, Miss Long, was the very best person I could consult just now. He happened to know that Miss Long was herself on the point of leaving Paris. How, if she could be prevailed on to accompany me in the first stages of my journey, and thus soften off the shock that I seemed to be so much in dread of for my relations.'

"Well, Grizelda Long came in, and at the end of half an hour everything was arranged. I dare say, now I come to think of it, the plan was made up between them beforehand. Grizelda during the last two or three days had, I know, parted company abruptly with her employer, so as likely as not Mr. Whyte made it worth her while to undertake the part she played. What does this matter to me? I never want to speak either of their names from this hour till I die. They settled it all—the train we were to go by, the letter I should write, all—and then Clarendon Whyte went away;

Grizelda Long began to help Aglaë to pack my things ; and two hours later the note to you was written, and we had started.

"I don't know how other people feel when they find themselves upon the road to ruin," went on Dot, after a minute's pause. "From what I have read in novels and poetry, I should have judged that the first few hours at least of the downhill journey would be pleasant ones. I speak for myself, and say they were the most thoroughly miserable hours that even I have known in my life. I looked every now and then at Clarendon Whyte as he sat opposite me (Grizelda Long went to the other end of the carriage, and ostentatiously turned her face towards the window), and I know that I did not love him ; that in four-and-twenty hours with no one else to look at, no one else to speak to, I should be as weary of hearing him repeat poetry as I had ever been of the tick-tack of the old kitchen-clock at Ashcot ! I knew that I should get weary of any one alone, and away from distractions and amusements. I can't say I felt remorse—like what you read of in books. I was horribly sorry for myself. I hated the thought of Brittany as if I had lived there for years. If it had been possible—I mean if I could have been sure the story would never be known, and if all my dresses and my trinkets had not been registered on to Brest—I would have got out, yes, at the Versailles station, and gone back to Paris. I felt a kind of rage as I looked at Clarendon Whyte, leaning back indifferent in his dainty velvet coat and lavender gloves, and thought how lightly the misery and shame would fall on *him* ! and—yes, Kate, I thought this already !—how certain he would be when my thousand pounds were spent, and his last conquest sufficiently talked of, to leave me to whatever life I chose to make for myself. I thought of you married to Lord Petres ; I thought of Arabella ; of every woman I knew ; and felt how unutterably more miserable I was fated to be than them all. Clarendon Whyte leant forward at last and whispered—there were other people in the carriage—something about the South and the Mediterranean being the land for passionate lovers ! 'I shall die long before you go there,' I answered ; for indeed I felt ill when I started, and the cold and damp of that horrid evening had made me worse ; 'or, at all events, I hope so !' And after that he did not make any more attempts at consolation till we got to Le Mans.

"Katharine, you know the rest. Grizelda Long, who arranged the journey, saying that she understood Bradshaw better than any human being living, had brought us by a wrong train. We must wait some hours at Le Mans before the mail-train for Brest would take us up. Our luggage, as we had had it booked on, was all right ; so were we. Our tickets were perfectly en règle, only we had got to wait. I think I was glad of the delay. It amused me to hear how Clarendon Whyte swore. He had, at least, a temper, I thought. There would be something beyond looking at swamps in Brittany and reading poetry to make the time pass ! And then in my heart I had a thought—not a hope exactly—a thought that something *might* happen yet, some one arrive by that late train from Paris and save me !"

"And that something happened," cried Katharine. "Lord Petres and I arrived ; and brought you back from misery to happiness !"

But Dot's eyes filled ; she turned her face wearily away from Katharine. "You came, Kate, you brought me back, but as to happiness . . . only a miracle could give me that, and we've no miracles on the earth now. Happiness to me means Paris and knowing people I like, and wearing becoming clothes, and being asked to dinners and balls. The very desires of the flesh (as Mr. Lyte would tell them at Shiloh) that have already been my ruin !"

So ended Dora's confession ; not an edifying one ! A confession presenting the frivolous or butterfly aspect of our many-sided life in as pitiable a light as the sternest moralist could desire ; yet still, as far as the manner of recital went, possessing the merit of truth. Truth barer, more absolute, perhaps, than a woman of higher nature could have brought herself to utter. For in higher natures, whatever their guilt, some spark of the self-respect which begets silence must remain vital to the last.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE RETURN HOME.

THE next day was Sunday—a pleasant sunshiny Sunday at home in Kent, and by an early hour Dora's two jailers were setting her

prison-house in order ; not, as jailer nature goes, unkindly ; against her return.

During the lonely hours of his journey from Paris, in the first contentment of finding himself back upon his farm, a good deal of Steven's anger against his wife had softened. Belief in her was shattered ; but what, if he looked into the matter narrowly, had his belief in her been for many a week past ? Was the act of wearing the blue and silver very much worse than the desire to wear it ? Was the dress itself—as Dora, unconscious of irony, had asked—worse than every ball-dress she had worn during the last two months ? Finally, was she not a creature to be judged by the rules of a world beyond his comprehension ; a creature with less than a child's responsibility (Katharine's cousin, too !), and here in Ashcot would not her small feet, by very want of the possibility of temptation, be forced for the future to walk straight ? Such were Steven's reflections. As he made them he repented him of his harshness ; nay, felt himself cowardly for having been betrayed into it, as a man feels who, in a moment of haste, has struck a child. And on Saturday, during the very hours when his wife, sullen and hopeless, was sitting by the fire at the Hôtel de Rivoli, had ridden over to Canterbury and hired a piano, a work-table, and half a dozen other knickknacks, that Dora on former occasions had declared to be necessary to her existence at Ashcot.

"You'll need to build a new house over your head soon, Steven !" said Barbara, as she looked round the altered parlour next morning ; the Sunday morning when Dora was expected back. "What with all this new foolishness downstairs, and a dozen or so o' them Frenchified clothes-boxes *up*, the kitchen 'll soon be the only room in the house large enough for full-grown folk to turn round in."

Steven answered, good-humouredly, that Paris had given him ample experience of rooms in which "full-grown folk" could neither turn round nor stand upright, and yet live. Then, Barbara betaking herself to the kitchen to see after the extra good breakfast which by the master's orders she was preparing, he went out into the sunny front garden, lit his pipe, and began to saunter up and down the path that led towards the road. The path along which, in imagination, he had

seen himself returning from work (on that evening when he listened to Klaus's story in Mexico) ; the path from which, in imagination, he had seen a girlish figure, a fond soft face waiting to meet him in the porch.

He finished his pipe ; lit another ; finished that ; heard the distant parish bell going for morning service ; and still no sign of the Squire's carriage was to be seen. It was close upon eleven o'clock ; long past the time at which it had been arranged Mr. Hilliard and Katharine should leave Dora on their way back from the station. Either they had not returned then, or Dora was remaining for the day at the Dene ; and with rather a chillier feeling than you would have said the occasion warranted, Steven went back to the house to eat his breakfast alone.

Barbara met him at the door. "The Squire is in the parlour, Steven. He must have come through the fields, for he rode up along the back way ; and I doubt something's wrong," added Barbara in a whisper, "for the Squire's got a face like the grave, and would have left his horse standing—only I beckoned across the close to old James—and neither man nor boy to hold by the bridle."

"The Squire—what alone?" cried Steven ; then without waiting for an answer, he threw down his hat and walked into the little parlour—cheerful with a blazing fire ; the breakfast equipage for two upon the table ; a few early snowdrops and violets (Barbara's attention) set in a glass by the mistress's plate ; the morning sun slanting on the window pane ; the ticking of the old house-clock sounding like a homely voice of welcome for the traveller who was expected.

"Good morning, sir ! I suppose, as I see you alone, that Dora means to remain with her cousin for the day ?"

Mr. Hilliard, who was standing looking into the fire, turned round with a face, as Barbara had said, like the grave, and passed his hand quickly across his lips. "Dora means to remain ? Yes, yes, of course," he cried, speaking very fast. "How are you, Lawrence, how are you ?" And he seized Steven's hand, and wrung it as if they had not met for years. "We crossed last night as we planned—very fine passage—wind in the north-east ; and—and Katharine thought I'd

best come round first, just to break it a bit, you understand. And I wish to God some other man had to do it!" exclaimed the Squire, still violently shaking Steven's hand, and with a purple flush of agitation gathering deeper and deeper upon his own kindly face.

"Break? break what, sir?" said Steven, moving a step away as soon as the Squire would release him. "Has Dora not returned with you, after all?"

"Returned? ay, she has returned, but you see—it's no good!" broke out Mr. Hilliard vehemently, "I must tell it you in my own way—as one man should tell another such a thing—or not at all. She started off—left us all in Paris on Friday—and Katharine and Lord Petres started too, and caught them, and brought Dora back. There's the truth—I've told it you faithfully; and, now, you can do as you choose about the rest!"

A speech that would take a page and a half, at least, to write had been dictated to Mr. Hilliard by Katharine: a speech in which the story of Dora's flight had been couched in softest terms; in which Steven's heart had been prepared by all manner of illogical feminine logic for forgiveness; in which a beautiful picture of domestic reunion and happiness had been reserved for the last; the whole of which Mr. Hilliard had dutifully repeated, or tried to repeat to himself as he rode along on this the shamefullest errand that in his life he had been called upon to perform. But at the sight of the homely parlour, at the sight of Steven's honest face—"Kate," he confessed afterwards, "I felt that every word of our fine oratory, even if I could have remembered it, would have been an insult, and so I told him the truth right out. If you had to break to a man that one of your relations had embezzled his money, would you work up the story of his loss into a sermon? impress upon his mind beforehand the blessing that poverty, rightly used, might prove to him?"

The Squire told his errand right out, and Steven stood and listened, his face growing whiter and whiter, his demeanour passionless as it had been on the night when he found M. Valentin's sketch upon his wife's dressing-table. "Was Clarendon Whyte the man she left me for?" he asked, after a minute, just a quiver on his lip, just a slight change—an ominous one it would have sounded to any one who knew him well—in his voice.

"Yes, yes," answered the Squire, considerably relieved now that the first dreaded words had been spoken, and more relieved still at seeing Steven taking things so quietly. "He was the man. I used to tell Kate I didn't like his looks when he was so much with them in Paris; indeed, if I had had my way I should have spoken to you then, but it seems. . . . Well," broke off Mr. Hilliard, reverting with a start from what he thought to what he had been told to think; "it really seems the thing was unpremeditated. Dora went to a ball that night you missed the train. You were harsher with her, perhaps, than you ought to have been on her return, and—without caring for this blackguard—she threw herself upon his protection sooner than face your anger!"

Steven laughed—a laugh which the Squire will find it hard to forget while he lives. "And who persuaded her to give up the protection of this blackguard she did not care for? Lord Petres? Miss Fane? I should like to have the details of the story correct."

"Lord Petres and Katharine went after them—Dot had left a note, it seems, and Kate knew what road they had taken, and—really, you know," cried the Squire, shifting about uneasily, and not looking up in Steven's face, "the story, kept to ourselves, is not so very bad—went after them (I was out of Paris myself), and overtook them at Le Mans. A Miss Long, some friend of Dora's was travelling with them. As far as appearances go, everything was saved; and then, Kate, like the warm-hearted girl she is, promised Dora forgiveness, and brought her back. Such a wan, miserable, repentant creature as she looked when she returned next morning! Her face would have touched your heart, Lawrence, if you had seen it."

"Would it, sir? Now, I have one further question to ask: *What* was Miss Fane's object in bringing back my wife from her lover? You will not, I suppose, refuse to answer me?"

"Object—object?" stammered the Squire, more embarrassed than ever between the dictates of his own heart and his wish to remember what Katharine had told him to say. "Why to save her good name and yours while there was yet time, of course. To bring back the poor weak fool to her duty towards you, and——"

"Sir!" cried Steven, with sudden passion in his voice, "do you,

does Katharine Fane, suppose that I would take this woman back ?”

“We hoped—on my word I believe I know how I would act myself !” interpolated the Squire—“we hoped, when you had looked over all the circumstances of the case, when you had seen that no actual stain rests on your name——”

“Mr. Hilliard,” interrupted Steven, “I think I’d better put in a word or two here ; it will save misunderstanding between you and me. No stain rests on my name, you say : to the best of my knowledge, I have done nothing yet to incur one ; and, in my class of life, a man’s own actions are what determine his honour and his dishonour. If Dora, instead of stopping where she has stopped, had run the whole gauntlet of shame there’d be no greater stain on my name than there is now. I’ll say more : if she had gone through years and years of open infamy, she could not be less my wife than her intention has made her ! She had taken the first step ; much better have let her take the rest ! Miss Katharine meant well—that I’ll never gainsay—but tell Miss Katharine, from me, I’d sooner, a good deal, burn Ashcot with my own hand, than see Dora Fane enter it. We Lawrences are peasants, you know, sir, and in spite of my marriage, and my introduction to a world above me, I’ve kept my peasant feelings still. The floors of Ashcot have never been trodden yet, to my knowledge, by a wanton.”

For a full minute the Squire was struck dumb by the shock of that last word ; shock such as a man might feel who, in the midst of addressing condescending platitudes to an uneducated audience, should suddenly find the platform give way beneath him, and looking up from an undignified position, behold his auditors above his head. It was a deplorable thing certainly, that that little fool, Dora, should have meditated an elopement : ’twas natural, manly—at first, at least—that Steven Lawrence should rebel against the thought of taking her back. Such rebellion was, indeed, corroborative of all the opinions that he, Mr. Hilliard, had formed of the man’s character. But to use language like this ! language which from a gentleman, an equal, had been barely justifiable ! In sore perplexity, the Squire turned aside ; fidgeted, paced quickly three or four times up and ~~down~~ down the parlour ; then, still without looking up at Steven’s face,

came and took his place beside him again before the fire. Quite composed, outwardly, Steven was standing ; his eyes fixed upon the wall before him, not in any particular degree, it seemed, remembering Mr. Hilliard's anger, or Mr. Hilliard's existence. " You have used language, Lawrence, that, I hope — I'm sure in your cooler moments you will repent of. Language that not even this unhappy occurrence can justify from your lips."

" I've used the fitting language," said Steven : " I've used a word more becoming than any other to apply to your niece and my wife. About time for me, sir," he added, with bitter emphasis, " to call things by their right names ! During the last few months I've been accustomed to hear a language in which one word may be used indifferently for truth or falsehood, for honesty or shame. I'll go back now to the vulgar English I learnt as a boy, and call vice, vice, and virtue, if ever I chance to come across it again, virtue." Having said which, he lapsed once more into silence, and the Squire, not finding anything particular for him to do or say, took up his hat, and, doubtful whether he ought to shake hands with Steven, or whether Steven would shake hands with him, began to make his escape, edgewise, towards the door.

" I don't see that this story need be made more public than necessary ?" he hesitated, at last, his hand upon the lock.

" That is a matter I've no concern in," said Steven. " I shall neither advertise nor deny it."

✧ " And you refuse, finally, in cool blood, to have any reconciliation with your wife ?"

" I do. Whatever sum I can afford to pay for her maintenance I will pay. I will never see her in Ashcot again."

" And," as he spoke the Squire came back across the room, " this as the poor girl will find shelter under my roof, I have a right to ask — you will not make matters worse by seeking Clarendon Whyte out ? by having any meeting with him that would entail further exposure upon Dora ?"

" I seek out a meeting with Clarendon Whyte ? No, sir ; I can promise you, easily enough, on that score !" answered Steven. " I've wasted too much time already on them both, and for the future shall

have work and to spare without running after fine gentlemen or their companions. If ever—a year hence, or ten, or twenty—Mr. Clarendon Whyte's evil chance should bring him across my path, I'd be apt to treat him . . . by the Lord ! as I treated a snake that got coiled about by body once while I slept !—take him by the throat and knock what brains he has out on the nearest stone that came to hand ! 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth,' is what is written, and I know of nothing wiser or juster to supersede that law."

The Squire stood for full two minutes more, nervously crushing the brim of his hat out of shape between his hands : two minutes in which many wild revolutionary ideas flashed before his mind—among others, that a working farmer, whose honour has been betrayed, may feel very much as a country gentleman would feel under the same circumstances. "Lawrence," he said, at length, holding out his hand, "I don't see that you and I should not part friends, or that what has happened need make any difference between us. Will you shake hands ?"

"Ah, indeed," said Steven, quite with his accustomed respect, "that I will, and thank you kindly for coming to break this to me yourself. As to making no difference—I can't agree with you, sir. I can go to your house no more, and it doesn't seem to me any member of your family could wish to enter mine."

This, then, was their parting ; these were the tidings that the Squire had to bear back to those who were waiting for him so eagerly at the Dene. On learning Steven's resolve, Katharine fired with indignation ; called him cruel, ungenerous, narrow of judgment ; then burst into tears, and knew that in her heart she had never more respected him, more sympathised with him than at this moment. Dora, after listening calmly to all her uncle had to tell, remarked that, as far as she could see, everything had happened for the best. It would be a sore trial, doubtless, for her relations, this having to receive her back. For herself, she would much sooner live on bread and water, and in one room, at the Dene, than return to Ashcot. And now another scene—scarcely less dreaded than the first—lay before the Squire : the breaking to Mrs. Hilliard under what circumstances Theodosia's child had come home, and for what period.

Oh, the length, the interminable length of this first day on which Dora returned into the path of right ! Mrs. Hilliard, who had not yet risen, buried her face in her pillow as soon as she heard the news, with the solemn assurance that she should never lift it up again. The blinds were drawn down, by her orders all over the house. "Have we not met with dishonour, a calamity worse than death?" she said. The poor little Squire crept up and downstairs in his slippers, not exactly hard in his heart against Dora, but extremely doubtful as to Katharine's wisdom in having brought her back ; upset to the last degree by the quantity of thinking he had had to go through since yesterday ; ashamed of himself, as dinner-time came, for feeling his usual appetite ; ashamed to look his old servants in the face. The servants, for their part, if they did not know, suspected the worst ; and already talked in whispers about the opinions *they* had held of Miss Dora at the best of times. Katharine sat all day at her mother's side, holding her hand, and vainly trying to find soft responses to the invalid's pitiless invectives against the culprit. Dora herself, the least concerned person in the household, passed the time in sleep. What was there to keep awake for, now that she had learnt Steven's decision ? If she thought for a week she would never be able to decide whether the boxes that had gone on to Brest would be restored intact, or whether, "as things blew over," any one would ever ask her out again : the only questions of remotest importance to her at present. She was tired, bodily ; heart-sick of everything in heaven and earth ; rather sorry, on the whole, to find herself back at the Dene, but still relieved that she was not to go back to Ashcot. And the bedroom they put her into was warm and comfortable, and the only form remorse ever took in her was self-pity ; and it was not in her nature to trouble herself about the sufferings of others. What was there to hinder Dora Lawrence from taking her rest now ?

So went by the first day ; so, with scanty variation, went by a good many weeks. Then the neighbours ceased to send inquiries—ostensibly after Mrs. Hilliard's health—the invalid by degrees began to come down again to the drawing-room ; the blinds were drawn up ; the servants left off speaking to each other in whispers, and the household, after a constrained, awkward fashion, went back to its old life.

I believe a place left vacant by death could scarcely cast gloom more utter upon a fireside than a place unexpectedly re-filled by such a return as Mrs. Lawrence's. What was to be talked about? The irrevocable past? the shame-covered present? the clouded future? Mrs. Hilliard, as time wore on, ceased to sermonize Dora openly; but every one of her languid movements as she lay, her handkerchief to her eyes, on the sofa; every good book she opened (was this a time, she said, for novel-reading?) every remark she made to her husband or to Katharine was, in itself, a sermon. The Squire never sermonized, never spoke an upbraiding word to Dot on the subject of her disgrace; but he knew that the disgrace—bruted, who shall say how? about the country—was matter of common talk, and felt it keenly; lost heart in hunting; hardly liked to be seen about in the parish; excused himself, two Mondays running, from attending vestry-meetings; grew moody and querulous by his own fireside. A more sharply-defined, albeit a greater misfortune he might have borne up against; but to have a niece at one's hearth who had run away, yet not run away; whose husband was indisputably justified in discarding her, yet whose relations were bound, more indisputably still, to uphold her, was so out-of-the-way a calamity, so manifest an upsetting of natural law, as to cut the Squire hopelessly adrift from all his old anchorage.

"If really there *was* any place!" he would say, in moments of expansion to Katharine. "Any place that she could go to just for a time, till people have left off talking, and till your mother gets stronger! I don't repent a bit having brought her home, poor thing, and I wouldn't like her to be harshly treated. Still, if there *was* any place!"

. . . . In which persons who have gone astray could quietly disappear, was what Mr. Hilliard meant; not to be sermonized, poor souls! or bullied in any way—only disappear! If there were some blessed innocuous process by which the results of wrong-doing—disgrace to relations, above all—could be wiped out, and the world go on pleasantly and respectably, as it did before!

Not an uncommon kind of wish, even among people of superior intellect to Mr. Hilliard's!

CHAPTER XLVII.

REHABILITATED.

No mysterious city of refuge was discovered ; no place of earthly redemption to which Theodosia's child could be translated for the remission of her sins. But by the time the spring evenings were lengthening visibly, the chestnut buds glistening in the avenues round the Dene, an unforeseen relief for Theodosia's sister began dimly to be shadowed forth.

Dora had never thoroughly got over the effects of her dissipated Paris life, the excitement and exposure she went through upon that fatal journey to Le Mans. Her strength, at no time great, had grown gradually less ever since her return home, and now that the east wind blew keen across the foreland, her old winter cough had come back, a colour that owed nothing to art was on her cheeks. "I'm ill because there's nothing to make me want to be well ! Ill as I was in the autumn at Ashcot," she would say, whenever Katharine questioned her about her state. "Consult Mr. Huntly ? be dosed and blistered to make up a village doctor's Christmas bill ! Thank you. You needn't be nervous about me, Kate ! People who are wanted to die, people for whom there is no place either on earth or in heaven never *do* die, I have remarked. Steven will have years enough to wait before he can bring a second wife home to Ashcot."

But still the cough grew hollower, the red that was not rouge, brighter on her cheeks, and at last, when May had set in, and the *Morning Post* was heralding forth the first gaieties of the season, Dora began to acknowledge that she did feel symptoms of failing health, and might consult a higher authority than Mr. Huntly with advantage. Not go up for the day merely ; have her pulse felt ; be told to take care of herself ; pay a guinea, and return to Clithero in worse spirits than she went ; but be placed, for some weeks at least, under a London physician's care. Have one more look, that is to say, at the treasure where her heart was ; see bonnets, and carriages, and streets, instead of the monotonous budding green by which this dull old Dene was bounded ; test, practically (what, for aught she

knew, was still an open question), whether the world meant to "receive" Steven Lawrence's discarded wife or not.

Mrs. Hilliard, when first consulted about the London plan, showed herself, for about five minutes, unusually open to reason ; considered, indeed, that it would be the Squire's plain duty to pay for doctors and apartments—"and you could get nice *moderate* apartments towards Russell Square?" Then, Katharine chancing to speak of accompanying the invalid to town, she went round in a moment, and denounced the whole proposal as a heartless conspiracy against herself. At home it had been bad enough. During the last three months had Mrs. Ducie, had any of her old friends, done more than leave a formal card of inquiry at the house? To be estranged from the whole of one's county acquaintance was bad enough ; still this was a humiliation that Mrs. Hilliard was prepared to bear, as she had borne all other humiliations inflicted upon her by Theodosia's child. For her own daughter, an unmarried girl, to be seen in London at the side of a woman in Dora's position, was not to be spoken of. "I have done everything that my duty as a Christian has bidden me to do for Dora Lawrence," said Mrs. Hilliard, in the tone of a Cornelia ; "but I will not sacrifice the good name of our family any further. Dora has committed a disreputable action. Let her bear the penalties of it by herself."

"But then if she is ill!" pleaded Katharine. "It will be more a matter of nursing, I begin to think, than of being seen by the world, if we do go to London. Mamma, you who know so well what sickness is, would you let her be ill, with only servants to wait upon her, in a London lodging?"

"I don't see why not, Kate. I was ill, with only servants to wait upon me when you and Mr. Hilliard left me to run (and a most ill-judged proceeding it was!) after her and her disreputable associates in Paris."

"Disreputable again! Oh, mamma, mamma, let us drop that word. Suppose the poor little creature is worse than we think! Suppose she never gets better! Would she be disreputable, I wonder, when she was in her grave?"

"She would be disreputable *anywhere*," said Mrs. Hilliard, shut-

ting her eyes. "Don't force me to repeat these painful truths so often, child."

To argue rationally with poor Mrs. Hilliard on any subject, from the flavouring of her own calf's-foot jelly down to the future that might await a human soul beyond the grave, was fruitless. So next morning, Katharine and the Squire went up to London; first to consult with Mrs. Dering, next to find the lodgings in which Dora was to bear the penalty of her want of character, or, if it should so happen, die alone.

A good deal to Mr. Hilliard's astonishment, Mrs. Dering's opinions were in direct opposition to her mother's. The Squire, like many other single-hearted people, was accustomed to paint character to himself in the blackest black, or whitest white. Arabella was a selfish woman of the world; had never liked Dora at the best of times; would be sure to go dead against her now in her hour of need. And now, in the hour of need, Arabella behaved with greater magnanimity than nineteen out of twenty stronger-hearted, weaker-minded women would have had moral courage to behave! The stupid skin-deep worldliness that seeks to push unwelcome relationships out of sight (miracle as yet unaccomplished!) was not Mrs. Dering's. As long as Dora had merely vacillated on the brink of destruction in Paris, Mrs. Dering remained quiescent. If Dora, in very fact, had eloped with Clarendon Whyte, Mrs. Dering would have bowed her head to the stroke with a decent dignity impossible for her friends to cavil at. In the present position, Dora—through poor Kate's Quixotism—rescued with singed wings from the burning, the manifest wisdom, nay, the duty of every member of the family was, according to Mrs. Dering, to receive Steven Lawrence's wife as they would wish the world to receive her.

"What, what is relationship worth if it does not make us stand by each other in the dark hour?" she exclaimed, in a tone that made the Squire take out his pocket-handkerchief and feel how much he had hitherto undervalued the sterling qualities of Arabella's heart. "For Dora to be alone in lodgings, and Katherine to visit her, as Katharine, dear child, would surely do, by stealth, would be simply to justify the worst suspicions of others. Steven Lawrence has

chosen (on barest suspicion—his wife and Grizelda Long chancing, on a country excursion, to be accompanied by this Mr. Clarendon Whyte) to quarrel with poor Dora. Let Dora's family show in what light *they* regard his conduct!" And not only was Mrs. Dering opposed to Dora being in lodgings alone. If the poor girl was really in such delicate health as to need a physician's care, why go into lodgings at all? The recent death of General Dering's brother must naturally prevent their entering into the world this season. It had been settled, some weeks back, that they were to pay a spring visit, children and all, to old Miss Dering down in Hampshire. Why should not Dora have the use of the house in Hertford Street, Katharine with her, in their absence? "Tell mamma, at least, that this is my proposal," Mrs. Dering finished. "Also, that as long as conscience tells me that I am acting right I will never be afraid of what the world can say of me!"

. . . "In short, the whole of Arabella's virtues may be illustrated by one old French proverb," said Dot, when the good offer—accepted on the spot by poor fickle Mrs. Hilliard—was repeated to her. "‘Rien ne ressemble mieux à un honnête homme qu'un fripon.’ See in Clithero how these good honest priests and Levites pass by on the other side when they meet me in the lanes, or coming out of church! Arabella, taught by the Christianity of higher worldliness, by the broad gospel of expediency, invites me to her house and shines forth—a Samaritan!"

But, though she could not hear of Arabella's invitation without some leaven of the old bitterness rising to her tongue, Dora did not hesitate for a second about taking advantage of it. The long-lost dress-cases had, after much misadventure, found their way from Brest to Clithero; and in better spirits than she had felt since the day of Lady Sarah's masquerade, Mrs. Lawrence at once set about re-packing them for her "season in London,"—so she persisted in calling this forlorn last hope upon which she was about to venture! Who should say she was not going to enjoy herself? It was all a chance! She might continue too weak to risk the fatigue of balls, or she might get stronger, and be out every night of her life. Who should say that the world, any more than Arabella, was going to

support Steven in his eccentricity? At all events there could be no harm done by taking the dresses. It would be amusement to look at them one's self sometimes, even if there was no opportunity of letting them be seen! So, late in the May twilight (the peaceful country silence round the house, the peaceful spring sky overhead) Katharine, looking in through a half-opened door, saw the little figure busy, and singing over her fripperies! stopping ever and awhile—tired even by their slight weight, her hand to her side—then on again . . . Satins, silks, feathers; ammunition for a whole campaign of dissipation; the newest sacks for the morning, the newest redingotes for the afternoon; toilettes for balls, for theatres, for dinners; even the blue and silver page-dress stowed away . . . Poor butterfly soul—as if ball travesty should be needed by her more in this world!

They went up to London, and for a few days Dora's spirits continued excellent. People might talk as they liked of the superiority of country air. No air so good in reality as what you got in cities. It stood to reason, all the fires must warm it into a state fit for human lungs! Then, no visitors having called, and the old Countess de Castro chancing to look the other way when she drove past the cousins in the park, she drooped. Who that had been brought up in Paris could feel well in this horrible, smoky, dingy London? Now might be seen to what Steven's injustice had led! The world of course knew of their separation, and of course took the husband's part. "As to Madame de Castro," cried Dot, her pinched face firing, "I would like to know the secrets of *her* youth. Oh the hypocrisy, the cant, the injustice of these hard old women of the world!"

Next morning, yielding to Katharine's wish, she for the first time saw a physician. He was a man noteworthy throughout Europe; able at mental as at bodily diagnosis; and nothing could be apter than his treatment of this poor querulous little creature, who—vainly fretting to keep in life's highway still—was already so far upon the narrow path to death. He heard, with admirable assumption of its being unimportant, the fact that both Dora's parents had died, prematurely, of decline; heard attentively, not with too ominous gravity, her accounts of herself; listened keenly to the flut-

erity had completely lost herself in Paris ! (Was not Grizelda Long still living, still letter writing, in Le Mans station or elsewhere ? Was not Clarendon Whyte in existence—at a wise distance from Dora's "savage of a husband," but not more reticent than his code of honour bade him be as to Dora's reputation ?) Had been saved only through poor little Lord Petres rescuing her by force from running away with such a man as Clarendon Whyte ! Really, in these days, a line must be drawn somewhere. Mrs. Lawrence, painful though it was to one's feelings, must be ignored, and the world ignored her ! From common acquaintances Katharine received invitations—curtly rejected always—with no corresponding invitation for Dora. Katharine's old friends wrote her notes, hoping, as they were "sorry to hear sickness was in the house," she would come and see them quietly any morning she liked to fix. What amusement for a small excommunicated sinner, to whom amusement had been prescribed, could be got out of a world in these rigid dispositions ?

They drove regularly of an afternoon in the park ; Dot, pink and white as ever, bedecked in the Parisian toilettes, for which, only a few short weeks ago, la belle Bébé had been celebrated in the Champs Elysées. Alas ! how she had fallen now ! During every drive she was sure to discover some new mortification ; some bow pointedly given over her head to Katharine ; some once-friendly face turned aside ; every afternoon she was sure to return home wearier in body, sicker, more despondent in soul. "I wish when doctors order amusement as a medicine, they would furnish one with a prescription for getting it made up !" she would say. "Ah, Kate, Kate, you should have let me go my own way ! Perhaps, if I had really done something wrong, people would have been less hard upon me—for everything in this world seems to go by injustice. Oh, will *any one* give me a kind word, will any one send me an invitation again before I die.

Some one gave her a kind word, some one sent her an invitation before she died. With the first days of June, Lord Petres came back to London, bringing with him George Gordon ; and George Gordon, who by Dot's account, had "never loved" her in her palmy days of Parisian celebrity, now, in her time of broken health and fallen estate, became,

at once—was it not his office to succour the wounded?—her friend Lord Petres had it in his power to do as much towards the restoration of a drooping character as any one in London. And although Lord Petres, left to himself, was not a man to incur personal exertion without due cause, he soon found, with Katharine urging him, and George Gordon as Katharine's coadjutor, that his best chance of future peace lay in present obedience. The Countess de Castro and a dozen other old friends now passed Dora daily without bowing. No matter. The Duchess of St. Alwyns, the austere, most exclusive, most Catholic woman in England, a woman with the blue blood of royalty in her veins, was about to give a morning concert. And to this concert—so George Gordon and Katharine Fane decided in secret conclave—Dora Lawrence, through Lord Petres' influence, should be asked.

No need in the fast-closing story of a yeoman's life to record the strategies, the feints and counter-feints, by which the entrance to an exclusive London drawing-room can be forced. Enough that it was forced; that Dora, ignorant of the hard-fought battle that had been waged for her, did, at the eleventh hour, receive a card of invitation to the Duchess of St. Alwyns' concert, and felt herself, then and there (as though repute, like nobility, could be conveyed by letters patent!) rehabilitated. The Countess de Castro—a foreign countess! Lady Dacres—the widow of a baronet! Who were these women, and what mattered their verdicts *now*? She got up, unmindful of her weakness, and danced about the room in an ecstasy. She rushed upstairs to look over her dresses: then—finding nothing fresh enough for the occasion, nothing but what, even if unworn, had lost its primeval bloom in travelling—away to Bruton Street, and the milliner. "I want a toilette for the day after to-morrow, for the Duchess of St. Alwyns' morning concert," she cried, growing taller at the delicious sound of that word, "duchess." Poor Dot—reduced to rehearsing her triumphs before milliners' assistants! "Let me see the newest—not fashion, but the newest prophecy of fashion from Paris."

Neither that day nor the next would she drive in the park. "When I show myself in public again," she said, "it will be as the

friend of the Duchess of St. Alwyns. I am sorry you are not invited, Kate!" In her eagerness to serve Dora, Katharine had forgotten to have her own name included in the invitation. "But another time I'll take care to have you asked. The duchess has evidently heard of me from some one in Paris, most likely from some one who saw me at that very ball which, in *prejudiced* eyes was the crown of my wrong doing; and asks me, I suppose, in my poor little way, as a celebrity."

She could scarcely eat or sleep with excitement till the moment arrived when the name of Steven Lawrence's wife was announced in her Grace of St. Alwyns' reception-rooms: the blissful moment heralding in three mortal hours of heat, of classical music, of neglect: George Gordon's the only face she knew, the only voice that spoke to her: but from which Dot issued forth with triumphant step, with radiant face (heat, fatigue, neglect, forgotten)—the Duchess of St. Alwyns' friend!

She drove home like one in a dream, in rapture approaching what she had felt when she walked with the Squire in her first long dress and cream-coloured gloves in Paris; ran upstairs, unheeding of her throbbing heart and shortened breath, and threw herself into Katharine's arms. "The Countess de Castro not there, nor the Dacres—only the very first people in London, and—and poor George Gordon! how in the world could he have got an invitation? And the duchess was charming, and the duke too. . . . I shall be asked to all their parties! Oh, Katharine, what a new world I see before me!"

Nothing would content her but driving that same afternoon in the park. Tired? What had there been to tire her? The doctor had ordered her to take advantage of every sunny day, and to-day was perfect midsummer! So, rather than thwart her, Katharine got herself ready, and in another half-hour—Dot overdressed, flushed; with the lustre of excitement in her eyes—they were driving along at snails' pace in the line of carriages that thronged the entrance to Hyde Park.

"Look cold, my Countess de Castro! Bow over me as you like, my Lady Dacres! Sadducees, whited sepulchres, that you are! Wait till to-

morrow: wait till you have seen my name in to-morrow's *Morning Post*! Oh, Kate dear! how I enjoy driving along and looking at them in their ignorance! Oh, how warm the sun is—how well I feel it; it seems to me that I've a hundred more years of life before me at least."

When they had proceeded farther—were no longer driving at snails' pace among the crowd—her mood changed. "However warm the sun is in London, you always feel a chill under its warmth," she cried. "I feel it at this moment. Kate," with sudden earnestness this; "whatever becomes of me, I hope I shan't be buried in England. I don't believe in ghosts, still, it's well to guard against every possibility, and my ghost, if I had one, would never lie quiet, I know, in this damp, cold ground."

Katharine turned away her face. "A ghost in brocaded silk and Parisian bonnet! What has put such nonsense into your head, Dot?"

"Who knows? Where do all our thoughts, good or foolish, wise or wicked, come from? But I don't mean it for nonsense, I can tell you. I've thought the same thing, often before, and now I may as well say it out. Don't if you can help it, let me be buried in England, above all in Clithero."

Katharine tried to speak, but the words died on her lips.

"There is the expense, I know, but you have been so generous to me all along I don't think you would mind that, and then, there's nearly the whole of my thousand pounds still left. Would it cost very much, I wonder, to take one over—*like that*—to Père la Chaise? The side facing Paris is my favourite. I can see it now, green and sunny as it was when Delphine and Alfred took me with them that Sunday, and we had our dinner on the grass. I shan't be wanted at home. There'll be no more place for me in Clithero dead, than there has been living. Uncle Frank, poor, good Uncle Frank! would be horribly embarrassed at having to open the family vault for me, and I don't choose to lie among the Lawrences—the wives, and mothers, and grandmothers who had led 'honest lives' in Ashcot. The odour of so much sanctity would stifle me in my coffin. I'd like to lie where the work-girls from Paris could come and laugh and chatter with their sweethearts overhead, on Sunday. I'd like—I was never sentimental before—but I'd like the Paris sun to shine over my

grave ; I'd like of a winter's night that some sound of Paris, if 'twas only the striking of the distant clocks, should reach me where I lay. They need put up no grand stone ; just a low slab with 'Dora' (not Lawrence) on it, to keep me from being disturbed.'

It was late when they got back to Hertford Street, and Dot declared herself too weary to go upstairs and undress. She should be glad to have some tea, and rest, as she was, in the drawing-room. "I'm tired—tired to death !" she said, going up before the same glass in which she had contemplated herself on the evening of Steven's first arrival. "But, without vanity, I may say I never remember myself looking better. What was all that nonsense I talked awhile since about ghosts and churchyards ? Katharine," she turned from the glass and seated herself beside the window ; the sunset slanting in upon her small figure, upon the rose-brocaded dress, the white lace bonnet, the sunken hectic face ; "there's something . . . I am tired . . . I shall be better when they bring the tea . . . something I want to ask you. The Cowpers are going to have a fancy-ball on the twenty-first ; I heard so to-day, and I know Lord Petres can get me an invitation. Do you think—if I go—I may wear the same dress I wore in Paris ? It had a great success—not an artist there but was charmed with it—the . . . the blue . . . and silver—"

Her head fell back heavily ; and Katharine in a moment was at her side. They carried her to bed : the physician was summoned ; a telegraphic message sent to Clithero—and when the young June morning broke, when the swallows were twittering on the roofs, Dot lay still and at peace.

No more dread of lukewarm friends ; no more need of noble patronage. A rehabilitation had been wrought which even Lady Dacres, even the Countess de Castro, must accept as final !

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ONCE MORE !

FIVE hundred pages have been filled in recording one year of Steven Lawrence's life. The progress of the next can be told in almost as many words.

Is it not so in the actual experience of every one of us ? A month, or two or three months, will yield amplest materials—rich colour, depth of passion ; warmth, vigour, life ; materials for a great deal more than one poor volume of romance ! The history of the next year, or dozen years, may be summed up in a short sentence : " This man or woman continued to exist."

Steven Lawrence, after his return from Paris, continued to exist for another twelve months in Ashcot. He did more than exist,—he worked. From the moment in which the story of Dora's disgrace, variously amplified, became known, it had been decided by all the gossips in Clithero that Steven Lawrence would give up his farm, to a tenant or a purchaser, and return again to his " old wild ways" abroad. His heart had never been rightly in the land. Something indefinable even to Clithero wisdom, had been wrong with the lad from the first. His life had been set awry—there was the truth ! by getting mixed up with the Squire's family. He had been made too high for his own station, and now—now could be seen how much store those of a higher class had set on him ! As a matter of course he would part from his land (not a few persons held decided opinions as to which portion Lord Haverstock would buy, and which the Squire), and go abroad again : and about the best thing the poor fellow could do. What good could a man of his age come to with a solitary fireside, old Barbara for his companion, and never a man in the parish, gentleman or labourer, that he could take for a friend ?

So said the Clithero world ; and the Clithero world was wrong. Whatever were Steven Lawrence's intentions for the future, it soon became evident that, for the present, he would hold on to Ashcot. On the same Sunday that Dora was brought back to Clithero, he made his appearance at Shiloh for the evening service—looking ten years older, the village girls whispered to each other ; but with head

erect, dressed, not as his wife had always made him dress, but in his old yeoman fashion ; and with self-possessed demeanour, too unobtrusive, too quiet, to be aught but genuine ; the demeanour of a man not so much seeking to brave off, as to disallow, the suspicion of personal disgrace. Next morning at daybreak he was up and out with his men. "My wife is dead to me," he said briefly to Barbara, as he left the house (the story had been told her yesterday). "You will see that everything belonging to her is sent back to the Dene : and from this moment forth we will mention her name no more. You and I will be alone together for the future." Then he went away to the fields ; put his hand to the plough, the harrow—to whatever work was being done on the farm that morning, returned at noon, dined as he used to do in the kitchen, worked again till dusk. After this—the kitchen fireside and his pipe, Barbara, death-silent, with her sewing opposite, till bed-time !

And this day varied, as far as work went, by the changing seasons ; and only so varied ; was the pattern following which the succeeding year went by : for Dora's death made absolutely no change in his condition. He never put on mourning for her, thereby showing disrespect, it must be allowed, towards the family at the Dene, but the principles of a Christian man, said the Elders of Shiloh. (No sickly apologists for human frailty ! Men who speaking on such subjects would quote you the grand old written law of stoning unto death without the camp sooner than any later instance of that law's infringement. Dora Lawrence had sinned : in sinning had ceased to be Steven's wife as much as if all the judges in England had divorced them. Should the husband she had sinned against mock the Lord's house by wearing mourning in it for a castaway ?) He refused firmly, quietly, to accept any remaining portion of her marriage-dower, when offer of its payment was made to him through Mr. Hilliard's solicitor. The money had never been his: he had no right to receive it ; and he took this opportunity of saying, with his duty to the Squire, that he hoped by Christmas to pay back all that had been advanced him for the improvement of his land. When he went beyond the farm, which was seldom, and chanced to meet Mr. Hilliard, he would salute him just with the simple respect of his boyish days,

but with no more than, "How are you, Lawrence! how goes the farm?" and "Well, I thank you, sir," passing on either side. Twice only,—he met Katharine Fane; and each time they bowed then, with quick-averted eyes, like people who shrank guiltily from each other's presence, went on their way. . . . the past, and all the love it held, as rigidly dead as though a dozen winters had frozen above its grave! He was friendly still, on matters of horse-dealing, with Lord Haverstock, but no more. (Despite her horror of the "gentry's ways," Barbara thought, at times, she would sooner see him drinking French wines or playing cards like young Josh again, than leading the death-in-life that he was leading now!) Other society he had none. Once, with pride smitten, with his heart desolate, he had been able to sink, by intervals, at least, to the level of Mills and his associates; had been able to seek forgetfulness in such sources as men of their stamp term pleasure. This was impossible to him now. The barest thought of dissipation, coarse or refined, filled him with loathing—did not dissipation remind him of Paris? And so, in his ignorance, he fell passively back upon the companionship that wise men declare to be the most efficient of all consolation,—the companionship of solitude and work!

Work, if it brought nothing else, brought its own material reward. By Christmas his debt to the Squire was paid off. By the following spring there was promise of such crops in Ashcot as the land had never been made to yield since Joshua Lawrence's death. Waving weed-free grass fields; well-kept potato ridges; the young corn green and upright; the orchard showing abundant signs of autumn plenty; and for whom—for what? Tired with work as Steven was returning one night from early grass-cutting—this ever-recurring question vexing his heart—a sharp bend in one of the lanes near Ashcot brought him suddenly with the Squire. The usual salutation was exchanged between them, and Steven had already passed a step or two down the lane, when Mr. Hilliard reined in his horse, and turning, held out his hand. "Lawrence," he cried, "you're just the man I wanted to meet! I've a message for you—come, shake hands, lad! don't keep up ill blood for ever—I've a message for you from Kate. You won't refuse to listen to it, I suppose!"

A flush rose over Steven's sunburnt face. "Of course I will listen, sir, to anything that you or—or Miss Katharine choose to say to me."

"Well, let the past be past then, and be friends with us ! Katharine's marriage is fixed, as I suppose you've heard, for the nineteenth, not a week hence, and she wants you to come to it. A very quiet affair it will be—not above a dozen people present. It grieves Katharine, and Lord Petres too, that you should continue to be estranged from us."

"They are very good both of them," said Steven, turning away his face. "Tell Miss Katharine, please, that I am grateful for her kind intention in asking me. As to going, sir—you must know how impossible it would be for me to do that !"

"Well, well," said the Squire, "if I speak honestly, I expected nothing less—only a year past, poor thing ! and . . . ah, well, no need to open old wounds afresh. If you won't come to the wedding, Lawrence, will you come and dine with me next Tuesday ? This is my invitation, mind. Petres is coming down on some settlement business, and I am going to ask one or two of the Clithero people, yourself among them to meet him. A men's party only. Kate is still in London with her sister, and poor Mrs. Hilliard is too ill, I'm sorry to say, to appear. Now mind, I shall take it as a show of personal ill-feeling to me if you refuse. Lord Petres, Katharine and all of us, wish the past to be done with. Surely this is a time when old wrongs should be forgotten."

Then Steven looked up quickly at the Squire. "The past can never be done with," said he ; "nor wrongs forgotten. I'm not that sort of man ; and, indeed, my wish, as long as I remain in the old country, is to have nothing to do with any kind of society again. However, sir," he added, "I accept your invitation ; I will dine with you. It would ill become me, after all your kindness, were I churl enough to refuse."

And when he got home, for the first time for months past, Steven made mention of the Squire's family to Barbara. "I'm going to dine at the Dene next Tuesday, there's news for you ! I'm going to dinner-parties among lords and gentry once more. Lord Petres is

coming down from London, and the wedding-day is fixed for the nineteenth. To think we never knew it ! We are like people living in a prison, Barbara, you and I ! never hear a bit of what's going on now-a-days."

He sat down in his accustomed place beside the hearth, and for a minute or more talked on quickly, jestingly, of lords, and ladies, of gossip and of weddings. Then, in a second, his voice broke—his face sank down between his hands—and Barbara, awe-struck, crept from the kitchen and left him alone. After a year's stoicism it had come to this. Nature was stronger than he : the man's stout heart had given way at last.

So much for Steven : now for the manner in which Katharine, in her differently-ordered life, had continued during the past twelve-months to exist. The story again is short. Through many a weary month after Dora's death she rose, went to rest, went to church, visited the poor at Clithero ; endured, until she sickened at her own endurance, the sight of the low white walls of Ashcot across the bay. Then, when spring came round, yielding to Mrs. Dering's entreaty, went up to London, and by degrees drifted back—what with lost delight in life, with paralyzed energy, can one do but drift ?—into the old London routine of two years ago.

The day on which she was to become Lord Petres' wife was settled for her (their marriage had been put off in November by reason of her mourning), and she saw Lord Petres for an hour daily, at her sister's house, and at times tried to persuade herself she was growing to love him. And Mrs. Dering took her to dinners and to operas ; and if she found no zest in conquering, she at least went back easily into the old habit of making conquests. And she dressed, with a certain languid renewal of interest in her own beauty ; and now—at the time when Steven was busy with his grass-cutting—was deep in the counsels of jewellers and mantua-makers for her trousseau. Katharine Fane went on existing ; as common opinion goes, went on living ; and a very enviable, pleasant life, too. Aged, a good deal, people said ; had never looked the same after that dreadful

misalliance of her cousin Dora's ; and, it was sadly visible, cared no more for poor little Lord Petres than ever ! But *heart* did not belong to the Fane nature. Look at Mrs. Dering, placid and contented with her terrible old General ! Look at Mrs. Dering, and you could see the future Lady Petres ; handsome, popular, decorous ; ice-cold to everything in the universe as to her own household. Thus prophesied the world, and truly ; Katharine, herself, would have been the first to endorse the truth of the prophecy.

Her marriage-day, I say, was now fixed—not a week distant ; and one afternoon, the same brightness in the London streets that there had been on the afternoon of Dora's death, she found herself driving home with Mrs. Dering after a long last visit on bridal business to the milliner. With a repugnance she would scarcely acknowledge to herself, Katharine had hitherto shrunk from trying on her wedding-dress ; and to-day, for the first time, had seen, shuddering as she saw, the reflection of the future Lady Petres, veiled, wreathed with orange blossom, as she would stand before the altar. A beautiful sight in the sisterly eyes of Mrs. Dering — an awful one to herself ; a sight that made her cheeks turn crimson, then white, and every pulse in her body throb with shame. “Steven, Steven, if it had been for him !” All through the sunny crowded streets as they drove along, and while Mrs. Dering talked in cheerful tones over the details of the approaching marriage, this cry rose from her heart. Oh, white wedding-dress ! oh, speaking of holiest vows—if all had been for him ! How had the marriage-feast been a consecrated one ; the dress symbolic indeed of a heart given, in the whiteness of love, to its new allegiance ; the vows not legal stipulations of a deed-of-sale, in the keeping of whose barren letter a cold future would be spent, but love promises, through tenderest fulfilment of whose spirit all the years to come had been made sweet.

Steven, Steven ! His name rang through her brain with a persistency that grew at last into a positive bodily torture ; and so, to still it—as a child seeks to still a ghost-terror by calling on it aloud—she forced herself, with trembling lips, to bring out his name. “Steven Lawrence won't come to my wedding, Bella, did you know ? but he accepted the invitation, papa tells me, to dine with them yesterday.

Perhaps it's natural he should stay away—from the wedding, I mean—but I'm glad to think he has dined once more at the Dene, and that he and Lord Petres have met. I'd like to think," something in the sound of her voice made this a question, "that I should see his face once more in this world?"

"And why should you not see it as many more times as you choose?" replied Mrs. Dering, with characteristic generosity. "Steven Lawrence's position has been awkward as regards you hitherto, from the warm way in which you espoused poor Dora's part. But time softens everything. You and Lord Petres both like Steven Lawrence. I should think nothing would be easier and kinder than for you to invite him to Eccleston."

"But before long he will have left England for ever," said Katharine. "I hear—at second-hand, that's to say; it's more than a year since he has spoken to me; but the people in Clithero all declare Steven Lawrence means to sell his farm, and return to America. No opportunity of being kind to him with the Atlantic between us!"

"Then ask him to Eccleston without delay," said Mrs. Dering; "though, really, in these days, a man's going to India or America scarcely seems to separate him from his friends more than his going to Ireland. Space is so relative, and—and talking of India we have left out Freddy Marsland. Is there time yet, do you think, to send him a note?" And then again the conversation went back to the wedding-breakfast, and the wedding-guests, and continued in the same channel until they drove up before Mrs. Dering's house in Hertford Street.

A lad, in the red and blue uniform at sight of which so many a heart has turned cold, was standing before the front door as the carriage stopped. "Tom!" cried Mrs. Dering aloud (Tom was the Derings' eldest son at school at Brighton); "Steven!" said Katharine's heart: both women's fears going at once to what was dearest to them on earth. Mrs. Dering leaned forward and beckoned the messenger to the carriage. She was not generally a weak or impulsive woman, but her hand shook as she took the envelope and glanced at its address.

"Thank God!" she cried. "Kate, my dear," handing it to Katharine, "the message is to you. It can't be very important!"

Katharine broke open the seal : the telegram was from Lord Petres ; and by some quicker process than reading she knew its contents. "I must go down to Clithero," quite steady-voiced she began ; then turned, with a face all changed and bloodless, to her sister : "I have not a minute to lose."

"Kate, Kate, what has happened ? Mamma—Lord Petres ?"

"Steven Lawrence has had a fall from his horse. He is badly hurt ; and I am going to him. It is a quarter past six now," for she had taken out her watch, and was looking at it. "I shall be in time for the seven o'clock train from London Bridge. Do you go with me, Bella ?"

"Go with you? can you ask such a question? Of course—if you really think our presence necessary—I go with you." And now, a servant having come out of the house, Mrs. Dering sent such messages as were needful to the General ; among others that she believed Miss Fane and herself would return by the latest train to-night ; and the sisters drove away.

For a long time not a word passed between them. At last, as they were going through the city, Mrs. Dering laid her hand on Katharine's. "Collect yourself, dearest," she said. "Remember Lord Petres' feelings, above everything——"

"Don't talk to me !" said Katharine, shrinking as though a touch were agony to her. "I *can't* bear it !"

And then "Steven, Steven !" the old burthen, death-toned now, rang through her heart. They were not divided finally, it seemed. She was destined to look upon his face once more in this world.



CHAPTER XLIX.

FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

THE twilight was deepening fast as they stopped before the arched stone entrance of Ashcot farm.

"Thank God you are here, Huntly !" said a voice, and at the same instant the Squire appeared at the door of the carriage. "I was afraid. . . . What, Katharine, Bella, only you ! I hoped it was the surgeon from town. Lord Petres telegraphed for him hours ago, and

as it was possible he might be here by this train, Huntly promised to be at the station to meet him."

"And how is he, papa? How is poor Steven going on?" said Mrs. Dering, when they got out of the carriage. "You are to wait for us here"—this to the lad who had driven them from the station—"How is he? Lord Petres' telegram was so short, and we were so extremely anxious, that——"

"Papa," interrupted Katharine, abruptly (she was standing almost on the spot where she had stood with Steven that night she rejected him, two years ago! there was the mulberry tree, whose boughs he had lifted aside for her to pass; there were the old-fashioned flower-plots; there was the low farm-house, with unaccustomed lights shining in its windows to-night): "tell me the truth . . . is Steven?——"

"—Steven has had as narrow an escape as ever man had of his life," cried the Squire quickly. "Still, Kate, you know we must trust in Providence, and Huntly seems to speak well about the broken arm, and—and for the rest, we must await the opinion of the London surgeon. The poor fellow suffers horribly when we attempt to move him," went on Mr. Hilliard, unconscious of the torture he inflicted upon one of his hearers; "so at Petres' request, he has been left quiet downstairs, just where they first laid him. Nay, Kate," for while he was speaking, Katharine had turned away towards the house, "Petres is here, and I will call him, if you like, to speak to you, but you had better stay outside. Huntly says the only thing we can do at present is to keep the patient perfectly quiet, and his poor old servant is watching over him."

"And how—*how* did it happen?" said Mrs. Dering. "A broken arm! I had no idea it was so terribly serious. Kate, dearest, papa is right. We must not run a risk of disturbing him." Mrs. Dering would have taken her sister's hand, but again Katharine shrank away from her touch. "Was it a trial of a horse, or what? We know nothing, except the miserable truth that the accident took place."

"It happened," said the Squire, lowering his voice, "because Lawrence wanted to get rid of his life! Till the hour of my death I'll say that. Petres does nothing but reproach himself about it, but I say no man would have ridden at the fence Lawrence did in cold

blood, and with his brain unheated by wine, unless he had been tired of his life."

Upon hearing this Katharine turned and came back a step or two. In the glimmering twilight Mrs. Dering could mark that a shade one degree more livid than before had overspread her face. "Tell me about the accident, papa. I can bear it. Tell me word for word what happened, and then—then I will go in and see him."

"Well, you remember, Kate, how you bade me ask him to dinner? I asked him; forced him to say 'yes'—there's the folly for which I reproach myself," added the Squire, huskily, "and he came. During dinner I don't suppose he spoke a dozen words . . . natural enough he should be constrained—bitter thoughts of old days, his own marriage-breakfast, held in that very room, overcame him, no doubt . . . and I must say received all Petres' attempts at conversation pretty curtly. At last, when the wine came in, he began to thaw; drank glass after glass, not so much like a man enjoying himself, as like one resolved to bring up his spirits to a certain point, and by-and-by grew noisy—as I had never seen him in his life. Haverstock was there, and Jack Ducie, and I needn't tell you the talk soon got to horses. Every one had his story to tell of exploits, hairbreadth, as all after-dinner exploits are, and at last Steven Lawrence told his. Some story about a leap, you girls won't need to hear the details of—"

"No, no, papa. Oh, go on!" interrupted Mrs. Dering, with agitation.

"—A leap that he took years ago on a little mustang of his in Mexico. When the story was told every one at the table remained silent for a moment. Then Petres turned—he was sitting next to poor Steven—'Lawrence,' he remarked, in his solemn way, 'this really is a most astonishing fact. Would you mind repeating it again? I should wish to record *how* many feet this little mustang of yours covered?' 'My lord!' cries Steven, looking round, flushed and excited, 'do you mean to doubt the truth of what I say, then?' 'Not in the least, not in the least,' said Petres. 'I merely want to know, as a fact worthy of recordal, how many feet this little mustang of yours is said to have covered?' Well," went on the Squire, "I'll make a short story of what followed. Steven lost himself. There's the truth of it! Said he wasn't going to have his word doubted by any man, was ready to take exactly the same leap, measured, on his

half-bred Irish mare, and back himself for whatever amount my lord chose. 'But, my dear sir, I am not a betting-man,' said Petres, with admirable temper. 'I am profoundly ignorant in such matters, and only imagined the leap to be an extraordinary one. If anything I said implied a disbelief in your statement I retract it, or rather apologize to you at once.'

"So like Lord Petres!" murmured Mrs. Dering in parenthesis.

"Well, you know—no, you don't know what it is to reason with a man only half sober! 'I want no apology,' said Steven. 'I want nothing more from any man than that he should hold to what he says. We needn't make the bet a high one, my lord,' he added, 'if you are really so averse to backing your opinion.' To have argued with him," said the Squire, "would have been worse than to let him have his way. The hour for deciding the bet was fixed for twelve o'clock the next day, Haverstock and myself as umpires, and soon afterwards the party broke up. Neither I nor any one at the table expected that Steven, in cold blood, would wish to hold by such a madman's wager, and when he made his appearance at the appointed hour next day we affected, all of us, to treat the matter as a joke. 'I never say a thing over night that I am not prepared to stand to in the morning,' said he, coolly. 'I was heated with wine when I told the story, and I spoke unjustifiably to you, my lord,' turning to Petres. 'I beg to apologize for my language; and now if you please, gentlemen, we will go on with business. I have plenty of work to do carting my hay to-day.'

"Kate, child," went on the Squire, after a moment or two, "you will understand, better than Arabella, what sort of leap it was that Steven backed himself to take. You remember Hatchett's field? the end, I mean, bounded by the sunk fence, and with the steep broken bank, half stones, half bushes, on the other side?"

"I remember," said Katharine, shortly. "Go on. I remember it."

"Well, Steven chose the very gap where the drain is widest (we measured, and found it as near as possible equal to the distance he boasted of having covered on his mustang), a gap seven or eight feet broad between the alder bushes that fringe all that end of the field. Now I don't call it by any means an impossible leap," said the

Squire, growing excited, "but I call it one of the nastiest, most treacherous leaps a man well mounted could take, and Steven *wasn't* well mounted ! That Irish half-bred of his is as clever a mare as I ever saw across a close country—to the last, Haverstock thought indeed she could do it—but she had neither strength nor courage for such a fence as this. Long before they reached the ditch I saw from the way she went how it would end. Steven was able to keep her head pretty straight during the gallop ; but at the very moment she rose, well though he lifted her to her work, the mare swerved violently aside. A moment later we saw her struggling in vain to make good her landing, among the stones and bushes of the opposite bank ; then she rolled back heavily, crushing her rider beneath her, into the ditch. Haverstock and I were the first to reach the spot. We extricated Steven as well as we could from beneath the mare, who was unhurt, and found him stunned, and with a face like death. I tried to raise him—he was like a log in my hands—his right arm dropped loosely at his side. By this time Petres had come up. He knelt down—poor little Petres—in the muddy ditch, and Steven opened his eyes. 'I was a fool, my lord,' he said. 'A head-strong idiot . . . 'twas no fault of yours !' then fainted. And we brought him home."

Without uttering a word, Katharine walked on to the porch. The house-door stood open ; Steven's favourite terrier sat outside, gazing with head erect down the path, as though in his dog-wisdom he knew succour might come that way for his master, and moved aside, without bark of welcome or of warning, for her to pass. There was no need, Katharine felt, for her to ring ; no need to ask if she could be admitted ! The presence which sets ceremony at naught was upon Ashcot ; Barbara, forgetful of everything save him she watched, had, for the first time for forty years, left doors and windows open to-night. With her heart throbbing till every throb was agony, she went past the little parlour ; was conscious rather than saw that Lord Petres stood within ; then on to the kitchen. The door stood open, a hand-lamp flickering in its socket was on the mantelshelf, the embers of a few smouldering logs upon the hearth cast a soft red glow around ; and there, on a bed hastily put together upon an old-fashioned wooden stretcher, she saw Steven ; Barbara, her head bowed down within her hands, sitting beside him.

He lay, as they had brought him home, in his riding-clothes ; his broken arm, with the coat-sleeve cut asunder, resting, in its splints and bandages, upon his chest ; the other motionless at his side ; his face white as a face dead since yesterday. Katharine Fane walked forward ; stood by Steven Lawrence, gazed at him, then sank—strong contrast to that homely farm-kitchen in her gleaming silk, her London bonnet, her delicate laces !—at his side. And upon this, Barbara lifted her head, recognised what visitor had come here, and rising (stately, implacable even in extremity of her own great sorrow), stood and watched her . . . This fine lady who had come, in her lady's gewgaws, to enact some last pretence of grief, some last foolery of remorse, by the death-bed of the man who had loved her, and whom she had ruined !

Presently came the sound of steps, the stealthy rustle of another silk dress down the narrow passage ; and Mrs. Dering and Lord Petres stood at the kitchen-door. Katharine's senses told her that they were there, as her senses told her the clock had given warning to strike, that a moth was beating round the lamp on the mantel-shelf. Her heart knew one thing only : that Steven, her life, lay before her dying ! Minute after minute she knelt there ; not even Barbara seeking to interrupt her ; knelt there, tearless, speechless, as a woman might kneel beside the death-quiet face of her first-born : then, unashamed, as though she had been his wife for years, took his work-browned hand, held it awhile meekly to her breast, and kissed it. Pride, shame, the presence of her affianced husband . . . what had she to do with these ? and Steven dying.

"Poor dear Katharine ! so soon overcome—such highly-wrought nerves !" whispered Mrs. Dering, before whose mind a foreboding worse than death was arising.

"Poor Katharine—ay, poor indeed !" replied Lord Petres, with more agitation on his face than Mrs. Dering had ever seen it wear before. "Had not you and I better go, Mrs. Dering ?" And he drew his future sister-in-law's hand under his arm. "We are not wanted here, I think."

They went back to the parlour, and listened silently (what could even Mrs. Dering, out of a world-wide stock of formulas, find to say

just now ?) to the heavy ticking of the old house-clock, to the dismal sound of the bats' wings, as they beat with ominous persistency against the window, to the mournful whine of Steven's little terrier in the porch outside. After five or six minutes had passed like this, Katharine came in. She closed the parlour-door, and walked up her sister's side. Her features looked drawn and rigid. The soft brown eyes gleamed anguish-stricken from a marble-pale face. "You are going, I suppose," she said. God ! could that be Katharine's voice ? "So I thought I'd speak to you first. I shall stay here till—till——"

"Kate," cried Lord Petres, coming forward, and taking both her hands, "this is the bitterest hour of my life. I would have given everything I possess to have withheld Steven Lawrence from carrying the wager out. Don't *you* reproach me ?"

"Reproach !" she repeated, neither returning his pressure nor taking away her hands ; just leaving them a cold leaden weight in his. "Why should I reproach you, Lord Petres ? Steven Lawrence was tired of his life. I had spoilt it for him . . . and he threw it away . . . and my heart is broken ! Who but me is there to reproach ?"

"My dear Kate," said Mrs. Dering, "this is too sad ! You are overcome to a most unnecessary extent, but you never *could* bear the sight of any one in pain, you know. Indeed, indeed, Lord Petres, I think it our positive duty to take Kate away."

"Duty !" cried Katharine, and now her hands fell from Lord Petres', and she stood, looking blankly in Mrs. Dering's face. "Ah, I think I've heard that word a little too often ! Wasn't it duty that made me turn from Steven long ago, when . . . when I cared for him—I may say it now ! and it would have been my honour and my crown to have become his wife ? Hasn't it been duty that has made me keep my engagement to you, Lord Petres ? Through all these months, when my heart has been *here*, to promise, to mean still to marry you ?"

"Katharine, Katharine, collect yourself !" exclaimed Mrs. Dering. "You are overwrought. You will bitterly repent all this romantic, overstrained sentiment when you have had time to reflect. The carriage is waiting for us, and——"

"My place is here," interrupted Katharine, shortly. "Don't trouble yourself about me, Arabella! My place is here—by Steven. It pains me horribly . . . even yet . . . to tell the truth!" and as she said this she turned again towards Lord Petres. "To you, above all, Lord Petres, who have been truthful, generous to me throughout, I thought, you know, I might have gone through my life without being *forced* to speak it! I thought when I was your wife I could hide, even from my own heart, how I had once cared for a man so much beneath me. But death—death levels all things . . . the truth is wrung from me at last! My place is at Ashcot, so long as there's a chance of Steven wanting me,—and I must stay here."

A flush, if not of absolute emotion, of something very near akin to it, had risen while Katharine was speaking, over the solemn white face of little Lord Petres. He stood for a full minute, meditative; then, out of the upright soul of the man, free, for once, from all small selfishness, from all *poco curante* philosophy, real or affected, came these words. "You are right, Kate, very right. Of course your place is with Lawrence—poor fellow! in this hour of need. I am more grateful to you, love you better, if that is possible, than ever, for speaking to me as you have spoken. Mrs. Dering, shall I see you to your carriage—you ordered it to wait? Mr. Hilliard, I know, means to stay at Ashcot, at least till the arrival of the surgeons, and so will I and Kate."

"Kate—stay here—at Ashcot!" stammered Mrs. Dering. "Ah! yes, and in the morning things will be explained between you, and——"

"And in the morning, and for ever after, we shall be to each other as we are now!" said Katharine. "What, do you think I could grieve for one man as I grieve for him who lies here to-night, and marry another to-morrow? Lord Petres," holding out her hand to him, "you know me better than that!"

Lord Petres took the cold hand she offered, and carried it to his lips: "I know that I shall never alter towards you, Kate," he said, simply and gravely. "I know that to-morrow, or next day, or ten years hence, if it should chance—such things have been—that you

should change your mind, you will find me exactly the same as if to-night's explanation had not occurred." Then he took up his hat from the table, crossed the room, and with his accustomed elaborate courtesy, offered his arm to Mrs. Dering.

Poor Mrs. Dering ! The universe was melting bodily beneath her feet. Katharine — the wedding invitations issued ; preliminary announcements in the *Morning Post* ; white silk, orange blossoms, all in readiness—had thrown herself at Steven Lawrence's side, kissed his hand, declared her love for him ! A sister of hers, on the eve of making one of the best marriages in England, had declared, in the presence of her affianced husband, her love for a working man ! a working man who might or might not be dying—this was minutiae with which, at the present moment, Mrs. Dering's overburdened spirit could not be expected to trouble itself. Katharine deliberately, and for Steven Lawrence's sake, had broken off her engagement with Lord Petres ! The world was in anarchy ; the hideous result of democratic opinions, the horrible living spectre of Equality loosed before her : only one small olive-branch of hope visible—the arm of a peer of the realm at this present moment offered to herself !

She takes it, and quits the house ; her silken skirts, with indignant rustle, sweeping down the plebeian farm-house flowers (that rise odorous and elastic instantly) on either side the garden path ; and finds herself breathless, voiceless, in the hired carriage that brought her from the station. "To the Dene, mum?" says the country lad, touching his hat. "To the station!" answers Mrs. Dering, "and quick, that I may be in time for the last train to London." After which she shakes hands with Lord Petres ; tries to murmur a fitting adieu, but finds no human speech adequate to the occasion ; and so makes her exit. Another actor gone from the fast-closing story of Steven Lawrence's life.

Katharine Fane stood for a minute or more as they had left her. Then, the sound of the receding wheels telling her that he was indeed alone, she laid down her bonnet and shawl ; not since Dora's days had the homely Ashcot chairs been honoured with freight so delicate!—and went back to the kitchen.

The tall figure of Barbara, such silent, tearless despair upon her

fine old face !—confronted her as she entered. “I can do all he’ll need, alone,” she said. “I want no fine ladies here, Katharine Fane.”

“Fine ladies !” repeated Katharine, sorrowfully. “I’m no fine lady—only a repentant woman, broken-hearted ! *Won’t* you have me here ? I’ll stay quiet, very quiet, at his side !”

“Your repentance comes too late !” said Barbara. But something in the “fine lady’s” face or voice must have touched her, for she moved brusquely aside to let her pass. And after this, for another hour and a half, the two human hearts that loved him best kept mute watch together over poor unconscious Steven.

An hour and a half ! At the end Katharine’s reward came. He turned ever so little ; something like colour passed over his ashen face, and his lips moved . . . “Katharine.” Old Barbara, who was bending over him, made a sign on this to Miss Fane to approach. And then, humbly, timidly, the “fine lady” crept up to Steven Lawrence’s pillow ; with soft, cold hand touched his forehead ; stooped and whispered—shall I attempt to guess what words ?—to senses that after the moment’s awakening were already dull and unheeding once again.

About midnight the Squire and Lord Petres, still anxiously waiting in the little parlour, heard the approaching sound of carriage wheels ; and this time were not disappointed ; it was the Clithero doctor ; and with him the surgeon who had come down by special train from London. The Squire crept on tiptoes to the kitchen, and beckoned Katharine out. Dimly she was conscious that Mr. Huntly wished her good evening ; that some stranger bowed to her ; that some other figure glided away as she entered the parlour. (Poor little Lord Petres ! While she lives Katharine will never know how he stood that night, cloakless, shivering in the porch, to leave her undisturbed ; an act, from Lord Petres, rivalling some that have gained the Victoria Cross for other men !) Then the two surgeons, accompanied by Mr. Hilliard, went away to the kitchen, and she was left alone ; to hope, to sicken with expectation, to despair :—Which heart among us but holds the memory—memory, alas ! that needs no whetting !—of some such hour as this ?

. . . By the time the sound of approaching footsteps told her the consultation was over, day had risen : the cheerful farmyard noises were stirring behind the house, the larks singing above the clover-fields, blithely as if to-day should usher no pain, no death into the world. Katharine walked across to the open parlour-door, and there, numbed, passive, waited—to hear the worst. The London surgeon's was the first face she saw. A few uncertain words she faltered out, then stopped. Now that the moment had come, her lips *could* not frame themselves into the question she had coveted, through this eternity of suspense, to ask !

“There is cause for gravest anxiety, dear lady,” said the surgeon very gently. (Horrible, if Mrs. Dering had but known it, he judged, not from silks and laces, but from the quivering lip, the suppliant voice, that this woman was his patient's wife !) “But Mr. Lawrence is young, and has a constitution so unbroken that we may hope——”

“Hope !” And upon this a great sob broke from Katharine's heart, and she heard no more.



CHAPTER I.

THE SALE OF ASHCOT.

FOR more than a week it was a hand-to-hand struggle : for one hour life seeming to have a chance of victory, for the next, death. And during this time, while Steven was unconscious, or conscious only at fitful intervals, Katharine Fane watched beside his pillow. Mrs. Dering wrote her expostulatory notes, never answered, or perhaps opened. The Clithero world talked and grew silent. Barbara rebelled for half a day against the invasion of Ashcot by “any more o' them Fanes, with their gentry's fancies—giving trouble, and fussing, and the Lord's hand heavy on the house !” Then, finding that this member of the Fane family had no fancies and gave no trouble ; finding, too, that her presence soothed Steven more than all Mr. Huntly's physic, she endured her services ; nay, thanked her for them, would bring her tea or food, and order her to take it. “If

not for your own sake, ma'am, for his." An order which (coming from poor Barbara's lips) Katharine, many a time, well-nigh choked herself sooner than disobey.

Nine days this lasted : then Steven began to mend ; was too weak to move in his bed ; but was able to take whatever nourishment they allowed him, and when he spoke—fever, and the delirium of fever alike past, spoke reasonably. As soon as things reached this point Katharine took herself quietly away from Ashcot. A niece of Barbara's, was sent for from Canterbury to do the housework, and Barbara, alone and unaided, waited on her master in his convalescence.

It was midsummer when the doctors pronounced his danger over. By August, Steven, a shadow of himself, tottering, hollow-eyed, was able to creep about the garden on a stick, or sit out in the sunshine beneath the porch. He did not progress, the doctors said, as he had done at first. Not a single bodily symptom was bad : he slept without fever at night ; ate tolerably, his injured arm was going on all right ; but still his progress was slow. "Lawrence wants heart in himself," Mr. Huntly said at last to Barbara. "There's no need for me to physic him any more. All he wants is interest in his own recovery. Now, if you could persuade him to get change, if it was only ten miles away, it would do him good."

Barbara received this advice in silence ; thought it over while she cooked the dinner ; then, when Steven as usual had gone out into the porch to smoke—he was allowed two half-pipes of mildest tobacco daily—came and stood by him. "A fine afternoon, Steven. Not so hot as it was yesterday, I'm thinking."

He went on silently with his pipe. During the last few days he had got strangely taciturn ; never answering any questions save those positively forced upon him. "Now if you was to have out the spring-cart and the old mare, and let James drive you a bit ? just get a breath of fresh air, if 'twas only a couple of miles off ?"

He shook his head, and still made no answer.

"Well," said Barbara, "we've all our own ways of thinking, but if I'd been sick to death, and there had been them that had come, and sent—ay, three and four times a day—to ask for me, I'd have

the civility to give them a thank-you for their pains as I mended ! There's the Squire, as you know, here every morning of his life, and when you were ill and at your worst, Miss Katharine was scarcely away from Ashcot. But it's no concern of mine, any of it !" And Barbara, at this point, made a feint of retreating into the house.

Steven laid down his pipe. "Come here, Barbara ; you always go away when I want you. Did . . . did Katharine Fane really come to ask for me when I was ill ?"

"She was here every day of her life," said Barbara, jesuitically.

"Come nearer, sit down. Is she married yet ? I have never remembered to ask the Squire."

"Katharine Fane is not married, or wasn't yesterday."

"But engaged to Lord Petres, all the same ?"

"Why do you ask, lad ? What should I know of Katharine Fane's love affairs ?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Barbara. I'd strange thoughts in my head when I was ill, and I don't rightly know yet which were real and which were false . . . Now, I could have sworn I remember some one besides you standing at times by my bedside !" cried Steven, looking at her eagerly as he spoke.

"Mr. Huntly stood there, and the London doctor, and the Squire, and as you bettered, my niece Marianne," said Barbara, sentimentously.

"Ah, I see ! My brain was confused. I talked, I raved a great deal, didn't I ?"

"A great deal, Steven. No need to go over all this now."

"I'll never speak of it after to-day. Just tell me what *kind* of nonsense I used to talk, and—and if any one but you listened to it ?"

"You must go to some one with less on their minds than me, if you want a sick man's ravings remembered," said Barbara. "You talked of those that are dead and gone, I mind, ay, and of scenes that were no credit to you, too, Steven ! 'So much on this card, so much on this,' and French words (you, that in your right mind, can know no more o' the French than me) and of a lady and page, this for hours and hours together ; a lady and page looking down and mocking you from the wall, and nothing there but the picture of

your poor grandfather, that never mocked man nor child in his life."

"And this was all? Don't deceive me; this kind of rubbish was all? And no one heard me but you?"

"Steven, I told you just now I'd no memory for sick men's ravings; I've heard too many of them in my life!"

"Barbara," he turned his face slowly away, and began to trace elaborate cyphers with his stick upon the gravel, "did . . . Katharine Fane ever stand by my side when I was sick?"

"She did," answered Barbara, without a moment's hesitation. "The Squire was there, too, and me—it was the day your fever was at its head. The Squire's family couldn't have thought more of you if you'd been one of themselves by blood," she added, "and that's why I say you might have the manners to ride over and return them thanks now."

"Go and bid James harness the old mare. I'll start at once. *At once*,—do you hear? I've had a thought in my head for a week or more past, and now I'm decided. I'll carry it out to-day."

"But you'll put on one of your cloth suits, Steven? and I've made you a best silk sling, and——"

"*Will* you go and order the cart round at once? this moment!" he cried, petulantly.

"And you'll put on a cloth suit, dear, while they harness Peggy?"

"I'll do nothing of the kind. I'll never put on any more gentleman's clothes while I live. I'm going to speak to the Squire on business—shan't see either of the ladies, I guess—and this suit will do as well as any other. Now go at once, Barbara; don't be obstinate."

And in ten minutes time Steven, for the first time since his accident, drove away from Ashcot; Barbara, her hand to her eyes, watching him with curious expression, as she stood a moment before shutting the great yard-gates after the cart. The weather was sweet as spring, though the fields were already ripe for harvest. But, cool as it was, the exertion of passing even at Peggy's pace through the fresh air made Steven faint; and by the time the cart stopped before the house door at the Dene, his face was almost as white as

on that evening when Katharine had looked upon it, and believed it the face of death in Ashcot kitchen.

"The Squire is out, and Mrs. Hilliard has not left her room, but do you come in, Mr. Lawrence," said the rosy Clithero girl, Katharine's own maid, who chanced to answer the bell. "Miss Fane is at home, and do you come in, sir, and rest after your ride." And, with the ready compassion all women feel for a strong man in his weakness, the girl ran forward, holding out a plump wrist to aid him in his descent, then ushered him across the cool flower-scented hall (past the spot where he and Katharine had bidden farewell upon his wedding day !) to the drawing-room.

The door opened and closed ; and Miss Fane, fairer it seemed to him than ever, in her soft summer dress, came out of the recess of the bay window that looked towards Ashcot. She drew close to her visitor ; held his hand ; murmured a kindly word or two of welcome ; looked up with sorrowful eyes at his haggard face, at the gaunt big figure upon which the clothes hung so loosely, at the disabled arm in its sling—then, shyly letting his hand go, bade him sit down in her mother's invalid chair, and returned to her own place four or five feet at least away from him. "It is very thoughtful of you to come and see us so soon," she said, after a minute's silence.

"I came because I wanted to thank you, Miss Fane !" answered Steven. Her heart sank at the weak altered sound of his voice. "The Squire has been very good in calling so often, and Barbara tells me, when I was at my worst, you used to come to Ashcot to ask after me yourself. I thank you, and him too, for having so far forgiven me."

"Forgiven !" said Katharine. "Oh, never speak of that now. All the forgiveness that was needed was from you to us."

"I thank you," went on Steven, "and, before coming to the business part of my visit, I want to say one other thing. It was by my own obstinacy alone that I met with the accident. Lord Petres did as much as a man could do to keep me from carrying out my bet. I hope you know this."

She held down her face, and faltered something about her being

sure that Lord Petres, in every action of his life, would act generously and uprightly to others.

"I'm glad to hear you speak so," said Steven, looking at her narrowly. "Since my accident foolish fancies of all kinds have run in my head, and among them, at times, was the fancy that you and Lord Petres were not such good friends as you used to be. Don't think me presuming when I say I should have grieved to have found that true."

"Lord Petres and I are as good friends as ever," said Katharine, still with downcast face; "but that is all. Our engagement is at an end—has been so for many a week past."

"More's the pity," said Steven. "I hope you won't mind me saying so, but I'd rather, much, have thought of you as married to Lord Petres than to any other man, when I am far away."

"You will have to think of me as Katharine Fane, now and always," she cried, "and . . . I don't know what you mean by far away! Are Ashcot and the Dene to be divided again then? We had hoped not."

"Ashcot and the Dene may very soon be one," said Steven. "It was about that I wanted to speak to the Squire—but perhaps you will give him my message? I'm going back to America this fall—please God I get my strength again! and Ashcot will be sold. Lord Haverstock would be glad to have a good part of it, I know, but the land lies so compact and handy, and has belonged to our name so long, I'd sooner it should all go to one buyer. I have it in my mind," he went on, "that the Squire likes the farm, just from words he has dropped at times about this field or the other; and so, if you'll tell him, please, with my duty, I came to offer him the refusal of it to-day. After all that's past and gone, I should be glad, Miss Katharine, to think Ashcot belonged to your family at last."

He had got back just to his old respectful way of speaking to her; to the way he had when he was a boy, and used to gather bunches of cowslips and ladies-smocks for "little Miss Kate" in the lanes. And Katharine's heart sank lower and lower. Once more she saw her dearest chance of happiness drifting from her, and pride—no: a thousand times no: not pride now! only the invincible, instinctive

shame of her woman's nature forbade her to stretch out a hand towards its rescue.

"Of course if you wish to go, you will go ; and I'll give papa your message. Strange," with a quickly-checked sigh this, "that you should insist upon living the life of a savage in the wilderness, instead of staying quietly among your friends in England."

"Ah," answered Steven, "it's very good of you to speak so, but the wilderness suits me best. My life, from the first day I came back to England till this, has been one long mistake. Unstable though I am in most ways, I *can't* get over my savage habit of remembering things, Miss Katharine, there's the truth ! During the last two years I've tried, as you know, to forget what . . . what will go with me to my grave. Since my disgrace fell on me—you'll forgive me for speaking so, this once ? I have tried to live it down — by force, you understand, and at times it comes back upon me keener, more intolerable than I felt it at the first ! Such a life as I lead now couldn't go on much longer. I haven't the stuff in me, as I told you long ago, to keep me straight (without one influence that I've missed !). If I stayed in Ashcot I should just drift into such a life, most probably die such a death, as Josh's, and——"

"Never !" interrupted Katharine, a sudden colour on her face. "You have been ill, you speak with a sick man's impatience. It is not in your nature to sink to such a life as you speak of."

"But I think I know that it *is*," said Steven, with complete sincerity. "I've stayed in Ashcot for about fifteen months now—poor old Barbara for my companion, the work of the farm to fill up my time—and I know that I have stayed there long enough ! The only life fit for a man like me is what you call the life of a savage in the wilderness, a life where there's no need, at all events, to play at danger over a bit of broken fence : " he glanced down at his disabled arm : "or to seek excitement, as I did in Paris, out of kings and aces ! Old Klaus (my mate I've often told you of) is expecting me—I've a letter from him in my pocket now, and, please God I get strong and have the sale of Ashcot settled, I'll be in New Orleans before Christmas ! There's no one to be wronged by my determination," he went on. "I haven't a relation belonging to me of the name of

Lawrence, and I shall settle Barbara comfortably in Stanner's cottage—that I must see about with the Squire, if he buys the farm—before I go."

And now Steven rose ; feebly, slowly, and seemed disposed to take his leave. "Some day," he said, "I shall ask you for a photograph to carry with me—of the Squire."

"Yes."

"And a photograph of the Dene, if you will give it to me?"

"Certainly."

"And perhaps—you haven't any, I suppose, that you could spare of yourself?"

"I have a vignette, like the one that was sent to you in Mexico," said Katharine, hanging her head. "Here it is," loosening a clasp of her chain ; "a conceited thing you will say to wear one's own portrait ! but you left the locket here one day . . . that day I tore up the photograph, do you remember ? and I was sorry afterwards, and put another one in its place, and—and I have kept it for you !"

And after a separation of more than two years, the poor Vera Cruz locket once more lay in Steven's hand.

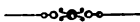
He opened it, examined it, looked down, as if comparing the copy with the original, on Miss Fane's face. "You have changed a great deal since then," he said. "This is the picture of a girl's face ! and yet—yet I believe I'd rather have a picture of you as you are !"

A pale little smile came round Katharine's lips. "You are as flattering as ever !" she said. "Give me back the picture of my 'girl's face,' and I'll be photographed, expressly to please you, old and plain as I am now."

Steven held the locket tight within his hand. "If you will, you may give me another," he said, coming closer to her side ; "but I'll never let the girl's face go again—never?"

He did not look much like a sick man at this minute. The hue of returning health was on his cheek ; the eagerness of youth, of life, of passion, in his blue eyes. Suddenly Katharine raised her face ; for a moment faltered, and turned awfully white : then, "Steven, *why* must you leave us all again ?" she cried, and held out two soft clasped hands for him to take.

She had stooped—to conquer—at last—; stooped, and won the happiness of her life.



CHAPTER LI.

CONCLUSION.

It did not, you may be sure, take very long to gain the Squire's consent; and even poor Mrs. Hilliard, after her first pathetic exclamation, "What, is Steven Lawrence going to marry *everybody*?" resigned herself, unmurmuringly, to the prospect of having her favourite child settled within two miles of herself for life.

Barbara, therefore, was the only person high in authority left to propitiate, and Barbara, Miss Fane decided, should be won by her powers of persuasion, not by Steven's. Accordingly next morning the Squire's dog-cart drove over at an early hour to Ashcot, and while Mr. Hilliard waited outside in the lane, Katharine walked up alone, with a beating heart, to where Steven was watching for her beneath the porch. Katharine Fane, with a beating heart, walking up to the old farm-house—a suppliant for Barbara's leave to become its mistress!

"Barbara," cried Steven, stepping outside the porch, and looking up at one of the bedroom windows, "you are wanted—quick! Here is Miss Fane come to see you."

There was a minute or two of silence; then the old woman's dignified step was heard descending the stairs, and erect, self-possessed (but not, Katharine thought, with the hardest expression of all upon her face) Barbara came out into the porch, and stood before her visitor. She was dressed in her Sunday gown, with whitest cap and neckerchief. Katharine's eyes detected these omens of good promise in a second, and she spoke out boldly. "You expected me, Barbara, I'm sure you did. You know what I have come to say?"

"I expected my Minister," answered Barbara, coolly. "Steven, are you mindful that Mr. Lyte comes for private thanksgiving over your recovery at noon?"

"I had forgotten all about him," said Steven; "but he'll be welcome. Never man had greater need, or better heart to offer thanksgiving than me!"

Another silence : the bees humming round the honeysuckles, the tide washing upon the distant sands, as on the day of Steven's first unexpected return to Ashcot. "And you don't know—you can't guess, at all, what I've got to say to you?" cried Katharine at last.

"I shall know when I'm told," answered Barbara. "It's ill for plain folks like me to be set guessing at this age of the world."

"Barbara," coming close to the old servant's side, and holding up her lips to be kissed, "Steven wishes to marry me, and I asked him to let me be the first to tell you. Will you like me for his sake?" . . .

. . . "I known how it would be weeks ago," said Barbara ; her face all aglow with the reflected happiness it caught from Steven's. "I known from the hour the lad mended that I should see you back some day—but 'twas no place of mine to speak."

"And you will like me for his sake, Barbara?"

"And for your own, ma'am. I have done that from the first day you helped me nurse him."

"And of all my conquests, I hold my conquest over Barbara to be the greatest," said Katharine, when an hour or two later (the Minister's thanksgiving-visit over ; the patient little Squire sent back to the Dene) she was alone with Steven on the sea-walk. "Now you will sit down, please, with the beech-tree to support you—yes, and let me put this plaid round you, sir ! You are in my charge, and must obey." And then, just on the spot where she had rejected him, Katharine took her place, lowly, lovingly at Steven Lawrence's side, and felt herself the proudest woman on the earth.

. . . Why speak of other things ? Of the world's surprise—of Mrs. Dering's horror ! even of Lord Petres' letter of congratulation, in which personal regret and desire for Katharine's happiness were so generously expressed, so delicately blended ? Why take from, or add to, the prettiest picture life ever gives us—the picture of two long-parted, reconciled lovers who love indeed !

During many a future month ; for the engagement, it was decided, must be a long one ; they saw each other daily, and every day passed like those first golden hours in Ashcot garden. Once, only once, there was a difference of opinion between them, and this was because

Katharine, woman-like, would argue on controversial subjects, beyond Steven's comprehension, and was over in five minutes. "If you knew how I longed to see you changed," she said, after a masterly side-attack upon the errors of dissent; "if you knew how my heart yearns towards the old true church, you would concede so much to me! Oh Steven, we are to lead one life! Can we not hold one hope—one religion together, for the future?"

"Why, to be sure we can!" answered Steven, opening his blue eyes wide at the question; "only, of course, you'll never ask me to leave Shiloh on a Sunday. I should no more be made a churchman by going to churchmen's places of worship, than I was made a fine gentleman by wearing fine gentlemen's clothes in Paris. 'Tis true I never looked into the real difference between church and meeting-house," he added, with humility; "but it strikes me that, unless both are false, both must be true, in their way, and it's just a matter of birth which you belong to. Now, I was born a Wesleyan."

And Katharine, who had been keeping in reserve a whole array of irresistible polemical argument, was silenced. Through his love for her Steven Lawrence might be swayed in most things, she knew (had she not brought him to think forgivingly, at last, of a lonely grave in Père la Chaise!). In his hereditary working-man's beliefs, social and religious, she would do wisest, perhaps, to take him as she had first known, first loved him. And so, for the future, she took him—the dream of a picturesque church, all music, and incense, and painted angels! laid, with many another dream, for ever aside—and was contented.

Winter came and went; February melted into sunshine; and it was high time, the Squire began to think, for something more substantial than love to be spoken of. But Steven, in the matter of settlements, was obstinate. He had his farm; and Katharine had two hundred a year of her own; and—he hoped Mr. Hilliard would forgive him? but they would both rather not accept further riches. So in the fresh spring evenings, while the lovers were wandering out-of-doors amidst east wind and damp and thinking it summer, all the Squire had to console himself with were fire-side projects of what he could do for them in the future.

Whether it was good for the world to grow more radical or more conservative ; whether the lines of demarcation between class and class ought or ought not to be maintained, were irrelevant questions that he had long ago ceased to think of. The only democratic possibility that concerned himself (possibility over which his kind heart loved in silence to brood) was . . . that the feet of Katharine Lawrence's children should one day tread the old paths at the Dene ; the voices of Katharine's children call the old house, home ! All very well for lovers, in the heyday of courtship, to talk about two hundred a year and Ashcot farm being riches. A time might come when Kate, and Steven too, would be glad enough to find that other people had had a little more sense, a little less sentiment than themselves !

So prophesied the Squire. Meanwhile the lovers held stoutly to their own misguided opinions ; and at last, when the world was green again, when hedgerow and orchard were hung in bridal white, were married.

THE END.

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